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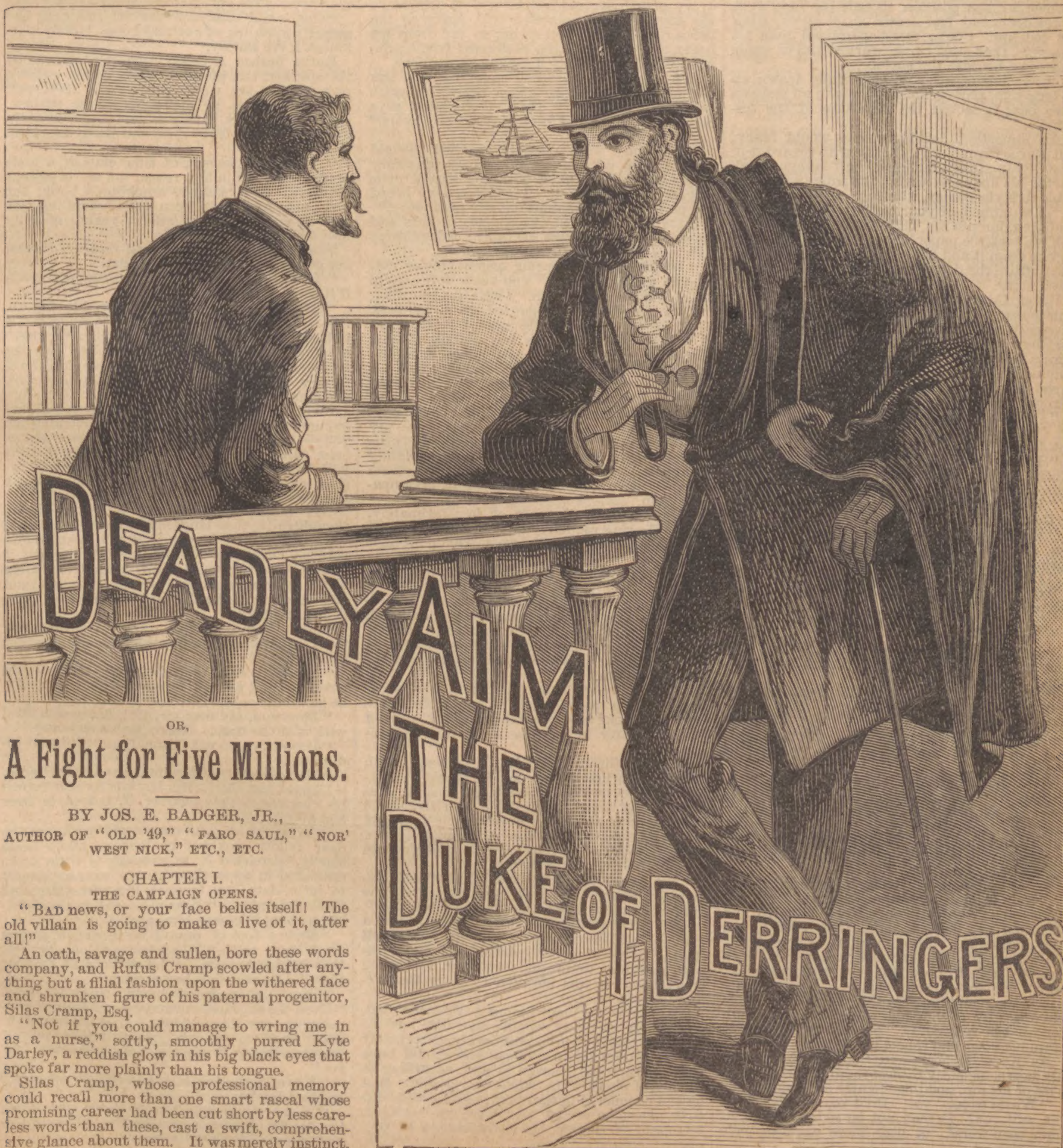
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OR,
A Fight for Five Millions.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "FARO SAUL," "NOR"
WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CAMPAIGN OPENS.

"Bad news, or your face belies itself! The old villain is going to make a live of it, after all!"

An oath, savage and sullen, bore these words company, and Rufus Cramp scowled after anything but a filial fashion upon the withered face and shrunken figure of his paternal progenitor, Silas Cramp, Esq.

"Not if you could manage to wring me in as a nurse," softly, smoothly purred Kyte Darley, a reddish glow in his big black eyes that spoke far more plainly than his tongue.

Silas Cramp, whose professional memory could recall more than one smart rascal whose promising career had been cut short by less careless words than these, cast a swift, comprehensive glance about them. It was merely instinct, for right well he knew there was scant show for

"BY THE WAY—HAS ANY GENTLEMAN BEEN INQUIRING FOR THE DUKE, THIS MORNING?"

unfriendly eavesdroppers here, in his snug little office.

"Out with it!" snarled Rufus. "The jig is up, of course!"

"Not so bad as that. It might have been worse."

Rufus dropped back into his chair, with a surly growl.

"Your face was enough to frighten the foul fiend himself! Something has gone crooked: what is it?"

"Take your time, my dear sir," purred Darley. "There's another day coming."

"And will bring its work with it; work for you both, perhaps," the old lawyer said, sinking into a chair near the little table at which the pair were playing cards when interrupted by his entrance.

"Anything is better than this infernal waiting and hoping and watching—may Satan fly away with the old rascal!"

"Amen!" drawled Kyte, with a faint smile.

"When does the next packet leave for down river?" asked Silas Cramp, unheeding if he heard these interruptions.

"In the morning. Why?"

"There will be time enough—time enough!" muttered the old man, brushing one shriveled paw across his skinny temples, drawing a legal-looking document from his breast-pocket and casting it upon the table, where it was greedily snatched up by his son.

A faint smile curled the thin lips of the elder as he noted the eagerness with which Rufus opened the paper, as he saw the hot flush spread over the face, the red light leap into his eyes.

Kyte Darley saw this smile, and resumed his former careless position, though the first sight of the document had drawn an eager cry from his red lips. Cooler, steadier-brained than his comrade, that faint ripple warned him of snags lying just beneath the surface.

The document was a will, carefully drawn up in true legal phrase, and complete in all respects save one; it lacked the signature of the testator.

An important deficiency, one would fancy, but Rufus Cramp did not appear to regard it in that light. Instead, a glad, half-savage laugh parted his lips as he thrust the paper across the table to Kyte Darley, uttering:

"A wee touch of your skill there, old fellow, and then, hurrah for THE FIVE MILLIONS!"

Kyte took the paper, but it was simply to tear a strip from it and hold over the lamp chimney, then utilize the flame thus borrowed to ignite a fresh cigar.

Rufus Cramp stared at him in wild-eyed amazement that quickly turned to red-hot anger. A savage oath parted his lips, and he rose from his chair with a violence that hurled it half-across the room. He seemed on the point of leaping at the throat of the cool rascal whose great black eyes were half-laughing at him through the curling rings of blue smoke.

"I wouldn't, old fellow," he drawled indolently. "The night's too hot for work of that sort. Sit down, please."

"You are cool enough, curse you!" growled Rufus, held in check more effectually than he would have been by the boldest armed front.

"What better use to put a bit of waste-paper to than this?"

"Waste paper?" echoed the other, still fuming. "It only lacked the signature of old Wellspring to be worth five million dollars!"

"If written by himself, no doubt."

"Or you, for him! What did you come here for, anyhow?"

"To sign that same name, of course."

"And yet—"

"I reckon I'll have to go away without displaying my peculiar accomplishments in that line," softly laughed Darley.

"You go back on us—on your solemn oaths?"

"The opportunity goes back on me, rather. Ask the old gentleman. If he don't admit as much, then I'll own myself all and worse than you are calling me, in mind as well as in words."

Kyte Darley nodded slightly toward Silas Cramp, who was sitting in a heap, his head bent forward, his brows puckered until his shaggy gray eyebrows met above his hooked nose, thumb and finger pinching his protruding under lip, staring at nothing, paying no attention to their words or actions.

Never in danger of "being hung for his beauty" the old man presented a particularly unwholesome view just then. More withered and shriveled and bowed, more than ever like a half-mummified corpse in all save the steady glow that filled his greenish-yellow eyes, Silas Cramp had dropped the conventional mask which can soften and mellow, if not entirely conceal so many imperfections in the best of us. He was with friends and allies who knew him for what he really was. No need with them to train his voice and school his features.

As Kyte Darley spoke, Silas Cramp shifted his gaze sufficiently to meet the angry, suspicious eyes of his son, nodding slightly as he said:

"Waste paper—yes! Hold your tongue for a bit, will you? It may not be so bad—it might have been worse. A little more work—a trifle more risk—"

"We'll do the one, and run the other," interposed Darley, with a little more animation in his voice. "Five millions! the stake is well worth it!"

Rufus Cramp shifted uneasily on his seat.

"I'm ready to do my part, but what I don't like is this stopping to swap horses in the middle of a crossing. Everything was arranged, and we each had our parts marked out. Why not stick to them?"

"Ask the dear old gentleman himself," lightly laughed Kyte, with a return to his former lazy indifference. "If he refuses to make a will, who shall turn his erring footsteps into the correct path?"

"But that's nonsense, you know!" snapped Rufus. "Catch him going off the hooks without first making sure all is well with his fortune! He was a thorough man of business, long before he first sprouted a beard, and a true man of business he'll die."

"And as such, of course he has long since made his will. I only wonder we didn't think of that before."

"We did think of it, and provided against it, of course," irritably retorted Rufus. "Whether he made a new will, or preferred to let the old one stand, what matter to us? Either way, we were guarded."

"So you informed me, but apparently your sure thing has petered out. Look at the Ancient, if you doubt the truth of my words."

Rufus was silenced. It did not require a second glance into the wrinkled, scowling face of his father to assure him that something had most decidedly gone wrong with their elaborate plans. And yet, they had so carefully guarded every point! Success had seemed so sure when the angel of death placed a cold finger on the brow of Romulus Wellspring so far from his home, so near that of the pretended friend who was even then in fancy fingering his millions.

"It is so," broke in Silas Cramp, the thin lips curling back from his yellow snags, his voice harsh and grating. "The old scoundrel says he has nothing to add to the will already made."

"If that is all—"

"If it only was!" harshly laughed the old man, flinging out one skinny hand with an angry emphasis. "You want to know what's gone wrong and I'll tell you. When you have heard all, perhaps you can point out our next move."

Kyte Darley poured out a glass of rum and silently pushed it across the table. Silas Cramp barely moistened his lips, then added:

"Whether old Wellspring suspects me or not, is more than I can say. You know how careful and attentive I have been. Until this morning, I could have sworn he regarded me as his best, if not his only, friend. He seemed to trust me in everything, and as he was plainly sinking with each hour, I ventured to again bring up the subject of his will. Once more he put me off with a word or so that meant nothing on the surface, and as I felt we were armed at all points anyway, of course I refrained from pressing the matter. Guess, then, what were my sensations when, an hour or so ago, three gentlemen were introduced into the sick-room, plainly by appointment. One was a banker, the others were physicians, and Doctor Birdsall accompanied them."

"I knew them all, more or less intimately, but Wellspring regularly introduced us, then at once entered on the business which brought them."

"At his request, the physicians examined him, both bodily and mentally, at length declaring that he was undoubtedly in full possession of his senses, with a brain as clear and well balanced as any one of their number. But not until Wellspring bade them put this decision in plain black and white did I even begin to suspect the whole truth."

"With this certificate of sanity in his hands, the suspicious rascal began to knock the props from under our feet, one after another, while I dared not utter so much as a word of remonstrance."

"Fully realizing his critical situation, though declaring his firm belief that he would eventually get well, he was too much of a business man to take any unnecessary risks. All the world knew he was accounted a very rich man, and the world was right so far. In round figures, his fortune if turned into cash, that day, would sum up five millions of dollars."

"We know all about that," impatiently interposed Rufus. "Never mind repeating the old fool word by word: give us the substance."

Silas Cramp did not even give his son a glance. Still crouching there in his chair, still staring at nothing, still picking his under lip with his skinny thumb and forefinger, he croaked on as though it was his own memory that required freshening.

"All the world knew him as a self-made man, and nearly as many would remember how he had been called upon to stubbornly, desperately defend himself against those who should have been nearest and dearest to him, according to the ties of blood. The whole world knew that he had conquered in that fight, and he wished it to be placed on record that, were the battle to be fought over again, his course would be precisely the same as of old."

"The ranks of his bitter enemies were thinned, he said, but there were those still living who would hasten like vultures to the feast as soon as word of his death should go forth. It was with thoughts of these carrion-crows and their evil lusts that he took this step."

"His will was made, and that will left his property, without exception, to his daughter and only surviving child, Portia Wellspring, at that date living on his estate, Fairview, near the city of Orleans. He had nothing to add to that testament. It fully expressed his carefully matured wishes. His sole anxiety on that score was to prevent any possible dispute as to the authenticity of that will."

"He called for pen, ink and paper. With their aid, and holding the sheet so that not one of us all could even detect the motion of the quill, he wrote a word or two, placed the slip of paper inside an envelope, carefully sealing it. Holding this, together with the medical certificate, he more immediately addressed the banker."

"In that envelope was written the name and address of the man who had his will in charge. We were all witnesses to this statement, and that he now placed the two papers in the hands of the banker, who pledged his word to place them immediately in a secure spot, where there was no possibility of their being either lost or tampered with."

"In case of his death, the envelope was to be opened, and word immediately sent to the address therein written. That would end our connection with the matter, unless some effort should be made to either break or discredit the genuineness of that will. Then, if called upon, we were to give our evidence accordingly."

"One could almost swear the old gent had gained an inkling of our rosy hopes," softly murmured Kyte Darley.

Rufus flashed a sullen, suspicious glance at the speaker, but his lips closed again without pronouncing the words that rose in his throat. Soft, careless as he appeared on the surface, Kyte Darley was hardly one whom he cared to openly affront. Yet—if he had really betrayed them!

"If one could be sure of time enough, a little professional skill might reveal the secret of that envelope. It is vulgar, cracking a bank, but just such jobs have been done before this, for less value," he quietly added, gazing steadily into that wrinkled face.

Silas Cramp shook his head rapidly, coming out of his half-reverie with a start.

"There is not time for work of that sort, even if it could avail us now."

"If?" echoed Darley, lifting his brows. "Given the name and place of keeping, what is to hinder our substituting something like this," tapping the mutilated "testament" as he spoke, "for the original? In case he stood by a former will, I thought that was our programme?"

"Arranged before we dreamed the rascal was so cunning," snapped Silas Cramp, clicking his yellow fangs sharply together. "There are at least three other witnesses to the fact that his will left Portia Wellspring his sole heiress, besides myself and Birdsall. How could we hope to substitute Marcia for Portia in that will?"

"It might be difficult," admitted Kyte, thoughtfully, then laughing softly as he glanced toward Rufus: "If you had not been so impetuous, dear fellow! Just think how neatly it might all have settled itself; a most charming bride, and a magnificent fortune! If you could only have changed roles with that infernal Duke of Derringers!"

Rufus Cramp scowled darkly, but his muttered oath was drowned by the voice of his father asking:

"You know of that affair, then? Rufus would never confess, and all I know is that, foolishly, he had some public row on her account."

"Bless you, my dear sir, all Orleans was filled with it at the time. Unless Rufus objects—"

"Drop it, curse you!" surlily growled that individual.

"Never mind," hastily interposed Silas Cramp. "I know that the foolish boy has forever ruined his chances in that quarter, if, indeed, he ever had any."

"As bright as ever man could wish, but the dear fellow was not content, to make haste slowly," persisted Kyte, growing a little more animated in appearance as his comrade sought to intimidate him by portentous frowning and muttered curses. "He could not allow the slightest opening to escape him, and—"

"Made a fool of myself when drunk, if you must know all," sulkily interposed our hero of that luckless episode. "Let it drop at that, or there'll be a row in sober earnest."

"Yes, let it drop," hastily uttered Silas. "Even the slightest misunderstanding now may complete our discomfiture. It is sufficient to know that we cannot hope to either coax or frighten Portia Wellspring into marrying Rufus."

"Nor of wringing in a cold will, it appears," laughed Darley.

"If she would only tumble down and break her dainty neck an hour after the old 'un croaked!" growled Rufus, viciously.

"Something of the sort may happen—who knows? Life is mighty uncertain—especially when there is so much money at stake," softly muttered Kyte, his big eyes partially closed, his red lips parting over his white, even teeth with a cruel smile.

Rufus Cramp shivered a little and his face blanched as he cast a quick, nervous glance over his shoulder as though fearing to detect some signs of an eavesdropper. Yet he muttered betwixt his teeth:

"That is all the chance we have left, it appears."

"We may depend on your improving the hint, of course?" laughed Darley, with covert maliciousness.

"If all else fails, why not?" desperately, though his lips were blanched with the utterance. "That, or provide a substitute. With five millions at stake, what is a single life?"

"There is no possible chance for an error? Marcia Wellspring is positively the next-of-kin, should aught happen to cut Miss Portia off in the flower of her youth and loveliness?" purred Darley, turning to the old lawyer.

Silas Cramp nodded, but there was a peculiar smile flickering about his thin lips. If Kyte saw, he failed to read its meaning aright, for with an airy wave of his white hand he purred:

"The gift of prophecy is upon me to-day! Grief, or some more potent agent, will surely send the fair Portia in chase of her father's ghost. If she lives a month, I'll sell my stake in the Wellspring millions for an old-fashioned copper, and choke myself to death swallowing the coin!"

"And the millions would all fall to Marcia!" cried Rufus, his eyes aglow, his face flushing vividly, avarice and love mingling curiously in his features.

Silas Cramp laughed harshly, bitterly, then sneered:

"Bah! and you both pride yourselves on being shrewd, far-seeing men of the world! You have more than once found fault with my ways, and thought, if you dared not quite say as much, me old-foggy in my ways of working for this fortune!"

"What do you mean?" muttered Rufus, his face paling suddenly.

"That you are totally ignorant of the real character of Romulus Wellspring. That though Remus Wellspring had left a thousand children instead of one, and each and all should survive Portia, never a penny of their uncle's millions would fall to them!"

"You mean—"

"That I know, just as surely as though my own eyes had read the will, full and careful provision is made against just such a contingency. If I had drawn up the paper myself, I could be no more certain that Romulus Wellspring has cut off all chance of Marcia's ever inheriting a dollar of his store. If Portia should die before she has issue, be sure the millions will go to some charity, or to found an institution of some description."

"May the foul fiend make his bed this very night!"

"Amen to that," nodded Kyte, still placid and smooth as ever, at least to all outward seeming. "Then we must fall back on the old plan of ringing in a cold will."

"And that is the best you can offer?" demanded Silas Cramp, with his harsh, unpleasant laugh, that was worse than a sneer for irritation.

"Unless you can do better, my dear sir," purred Darley.

"And you, Rufus! Got a word to say?"

A growl, instead. Rufus was not blessed with very brilliant wits, and now what brain he had was completely befogged by this sudden upsetting of their carefully laid plans.

Something like anger flashed into the yellowish eyes as Silas faced him, speaking rapidly:

"If you had not played the miserable ass back yonder! If you had worked your cards aright, and made the most of your chances—if you had even been content to permit them to play of their own accord, even! We might now be quietly watching this old money-bags drift away from earth without a single care for the future!"

"It can't be helped now, so what's the use of harping on that worn string all the time?" sourly muttered his hopeful son.

"And not content with ruining the brightest prospect mortal man ever had, you must go and entangle yourself with that penniless wench—with Marcia Wellspring, of all the girls in the world! Bah! Sometimes I am sorely tempted to doubt your really being son of mine!"

"Only since—how long since mother died?" sneered Rufus, and irreverent, brutal as the hint was, the bolt struck home.

Silas laughed faintly, and a tiny flush tinged his withered cheek. With a wry grimace he replied:

"I was wishing *your* past might be lived over, but if that would entail *mine*—Never mind. To business:

"Romulus Wellspring still trusts me, else he would have chosen some other messenger to send for his daughter."

"He has sent for her, then?" sharply interposed Darley.

"I promised to go by the first packet. I feared he would wish to telegraph, but he firmly believes he will recover, and wished to avoid terrifying Portia more than was absolutely necessary."

"What part are we to play?"

"Rufus must take my place and carry word to the girl. I will invent some satisfactory excuse, or else keep out of his sight. I know that the end is near—I firmly believe he will not outlast this night—but I feel I can do more good here, watching our interests."

"Steam is rapid, but lightning can give it odds and a beating. If he should die, that precious banker would send a message over the wires to the custodian of that blessed will. He would inform the girl, and if not preventing her journey, would bear her company, most likely."

"If so, doubtless they would send word by what steamer they were coming. I can arrange so much, at least," was the equable response. "I will send a dispatch to you, to await the boat, far enough ahead for you to stop off and catch their vessel. Of course, if this should happen, we will have to alter our plans once more."

Kyte Darley shrugged his shoulders, murmuring:

"Then you have plans? Really, you surprise me, dear sir! I thought them all knocked into oblivion."

Silas Cramp chuckled softly. A thorough-paced rascal, he felt proud of his cunning and foresight, and it pleased him to think that but for him all would be lost.

"You look to me, then? You admit that you know not which way to turn? It is the old foggy who must bring success out of defeat, is it?"

"That, and more, if you want," coolly returned Darley. "You plan and we'll work. Only tell us plainly just what we are to do."

"Draw closer, then," nodded Silas, showing his yellow fangs. "What I've got to say, not even these walls may catch."

There was something in his face, his eyes, his voice, that caused Rufus to turn a sickly white, and even opened the sleepy-appearing eyes of Kyte Darley. They drew nearer, as requested, and then in low, muttering tones, Silas Cramp made known to them his amended scheme for winning the Wellspring millions.

Rapidly as he whispered, the revelation took considerable time, but from the manner in which the eyes of his hearers sparkled, from the swift and varying changes which passed over their countenances, it was plain enough neither of the younger men found the time wasted.

"It will work! It *must* work!" at length exclaimed Rufus, rising.

"Do your part well, and steer clear of liquor. Go and make sure of a berth at once. Be on the watch for me. If there is any change, I will bring you word. I must go back to Wellspring now."

Together they left the office, and passed into the open air.

CHAPTER II.

REVIEWING THE FORCES.

JUST as the last echoes of the War for Independence were dying away, the wife of a petty merchant and modest ship-owner presented her lord and master with twin sons. Jonas Wellspring was by no means superstitious, nor did he place any faith in the old adage of "Give a dog a bad name, etc." But being decidedly original himself, he thought he could afford to plagiarize a little from ancient history for the sake of giving his double-blessing names which could not possibly be confounded with those of Tom, Dick or Harry. It would be equivalent to taking out a patent or a copyright for them, and in that sleepy, groove-running community there would be little fear of even a verbal infringement.

The good wife probably never heard the names before, not being addicted to reading save on the Sabbath Day, and then only in sacred history. The names struck her ear, and her consent was cheerfully given. Thus it came about that the twin sons and heirs of the Boston merchant and ship-owner were named Romulus and Remus, after the famous wolf-nurslings of Ancient Rome.

The troublous times, calling for boldness and caution, for audacity and secrecy, for swift thought and many shrewd expedients to save one's head and property at the same time, may have had something to do in molding the dispositions of the twins, for certain it is that they were children whom one could not measure with the customary standard for their age. Shrewd, quick-witted, all alive, fertile of expedient. Bold and aggressive, humble and meek, ready with a blow if a word would not suffice to gain the desired end. If driven from one position, always having another ready for occupation, and in extremely critical situations not shrinking from a lie, but ever making it sound more like truth than truth itself.

Even as children the twins astonished and delighted their worthy father. As youths they knew more about the "tricks of trade" than he

had ever learned, and were quite as capable as they were willing to relieve him of all business cares. Long before the first down of manhood began to sprout on their rosy cheeks, Jonas Wellspring overcame the novelty of acting on their advice, and father though he was, in privacy he was not too proud to admit that in so doing he had acted wisely.

Thus it was that the first foundation for the future Wellspring millions was laid.

Like all brothers, Romulus and Remus had occasional quarrels, more than once descending to blows and spiteful hair-pulling, but it was not until after their parents had been laid in the grave that the twins bade fair to resemble their namesakes of the Seven Hills in more than their names.

The business had prospered marvelously, and when Jonas Wellspring followed his good wife to the churchyard, he had long been accounted a very wealthy man, for that period. Dying, he besought his sons to keep the old firm alive in fact as in name. Together they might defy all competition; divided, they would certainly become rivals, if not enemies.

This was good advice, and for some time it was scrupulously followed by the brothers. If anything, the fraternal bonds grew stronger and closer when the time came for them to turn their thoughts toward love and marriage, for while their eyes turned in the same direction, each one coveted only what the other simply respected.

Helen and Ellen Massey were twins, a few years younger than the Wellspring brothers. Like them, they were marvelously alike in every physical respect; so much so that only the eyes of true love could have distinguished one from the other, at all times. Twins proverbially resemble each other, but in these two instances—and the fact is important as bearing on events yet to be recorded—but seldom if ever was there a stronger likeness than this between Helen and Ellen, though that existing between Romulus and Remus was quite as remarkable.

Romulus loved Helen, and Remus was infatuated with Ellen. Their wooing prospered, as did everything to which they devoted their minds and energies. They were married at the same time, and began housekeeping beneath the same roof.

Possibly that was their first serious mistake, for the honeymoon had scarcely waned before the sisters began to quarrel. If the brothers were not saints, neither were their wives angels, and though twins are poetically pictured as but one soul with two bodies, such is not always the case.

Helen was really a kind, generous, truthful, if rather hasty-tempered woman, while Ellen was almost opposite in all respects save temper, mentally considered. And so, from quarreling with each other, the wives soon embroiled their husbands.

They separated, each taking a house for himself, but the mischief grew instead of lessened, and before their first children could run alone, the firm of Wellspring & Sons passed out of existence and twin rivals sprung out of the ruins.

For years both prospered, but in the end the prediction of old Wellspring was realized, at least in part. If Romulus kept steadily striding toward the goal of millions, Remus began to slip backward. At any time a helping hand from his brother would have checked and turned his face once more toward fortune, but Remus would not ask nor Romulus offer that help. They were enemies with all that word implies. They never spoke to each other when chance or business brought them face to face, and each day only widened the breach between them.

Naturally each wife sided with her husband, and as invariably happens under such circumstances, feminine tongues kept the gaping wounds raw and rankling. And then, the long-anticipated crash came to the weaker vessel, mainly brought about, it must be admitted, by desperate efforts to check the upward course of his more favored brother.

This might have proved a blessing in disguise, only for the luckless tongue of woman. Romulus was actually on his way to visit his fallen brother, to lend him a helping hand, when an idle bit of gossip chanced to meet his ear. Ellen Wellspring was openly accusing him of ruining his brother, even going so far as to charge him with stooping to perjury, if not actual theft and forgery.

Fiery tempered, Romulus Wellspring listened and then turned back. Stung by a woman's tongue, he bent his every energy to completing the ruin of his twin brother, never resting until Remus Wellspring, almost penniless, shaken in mind and body, abandoned the ruins and fled, no one could positively say whither.

Then, when those he regarded as his bitterest enemies could by no possibility be directly benefited by his liberality, Romulus Wellspring opened his purse and scrupulously discharged every remaining obligation, openly asserting that the name he bore should never be coupled with that of a defaulter while he had a dollar remaining.

For years all went well with Romulus in his business affairs. All that he touched seemed to prosper and turn into gold, until he became

one among the wealthiest men of his age. But there his prosperity ceased.

His home was an unpleasant one, for his wife had grown sour and hardened by that unnatural rivalry, increased by failing health. One after another their children sickened and died, until, when Helen Wellspring was borne to her grave, but one remained—she who was to become the central figure in a strange and desperate fight for gold.

Long before this period, Romulus Wellspring had business enterprises in half the principal cities of the Union, and a dozen beautiful homes in as many different localities. His love, always strong, now concentrated itself on Portia. Jealously he watched her, fearing lest she, too, should be wrested from him by the hand of death, magnifying her slightest indisposition into dangerous illness, petting and coddling her as only a man of his nature can. Though she grew stronger as she grew older, he could never rest easy. In his eyes she was ever an invalid, on whom a frosty breath must never blow. And it was mainly for her that he built his beautiful house and formed his lovely grounds near New Orleans, where Portia passed all save the very hottest months of the year.

During these years Romulus Wellspring was not permitted to wholly forget his brother or his brother's wife. At brief intervals he would receive some token from them, perhaps only a word or a single phrase, but each one calculated to deepen the breach between them. Three several times strong opposition grew up against his business, each one engineered if not entirely concocted by Remus; each time he conquered, though not without hard work and great expense.

Then came a long silence, and it was fully a year afterward that Romulus learned this was owing, no doubt, to the death of Ellen Wellspring. By close inquiry he learned that Remus was gradually breaking up in constitution if not in mind, but he felt only a grim satisfaction at the tidings.

It was retribution.

Three years later Remus died, leaving—still the coincidence was maintained—a single child, and she a daughter within a few weeks of Portia's age, named Marcia. If not actually poor, she had but a trifle left her, comparatively speaking: a small plantation near the Mississippi River, with barely enough slaves to carry it on.

She was more enterprising, or else possessed a meeker spirit than her mother, for soon after the death of her father, she wrote to his twin brother, pitifully detailing her situation, begging him to help her bury the past, or at least to grant her an interview in person. She felt that he would not refuse this favor, and so he might expect her almost as early as the letter reached him.

She made the visit, but too late to intercept her uncle. As the easiest method of averting what must prove a disagreeable scene, Romulus Wellspring fled in hot haste, only returning to the city when informed of her departure. Twice more Marcia endeavored to meet him, but as often was she foiled. And then her real nature revealed itself. She not only wrote him an abusive letter, but actually caused her side of the almost forgotten failure to be published in the papers, making him out a scoundrel of the very first water. The assault on himself he might have overlooked, but it was coupled with one on his wife and family. In it all, there was but the shadow of truth, but even a ghost of that sort has teeth that bite deep and painfully.

Through the lawyer who attended to all of his more dubious work, Romulus Wellspring guarded against any further attacks of this sort, and thanks to Silas Cramp, he had heard nothing of Marcia Wellspring for several years when this chronicle opens.

Urgent business called him from Fairview to St. Louis in late spring, and while there he was suddenly taken ill. At first glance, the doctor called in feared it was a case of cholera, but the alarming symptoms soon moderated, though leaving the patient alarmingly weak. The strong, hale and hearty man of business laughed to scorn the roundabout hint that it might be as well to send for his daughter and begin to take thought for the future. It was but a passing indisposition, and long ere the child could reach him he would be on his feet again, sounder than ever. And so he believed while saying, too, but as the days and nights passed on, each one leaving him weaker and less inclined to laugh at what the result might be, he summoned Silas Cramp to him, and in the end bade his old lawyer and far-away relative hasten to fetch Portia to his bedside.

"Not that I'm going to knock under, mind you," he muttered with all his old obstinacy. "I'll outlive every mother's son of you! But a sight of her sweet face will be worth more than all the drugs in your pharmacy, doctor!"

A very distant relative indeed was Silas Cramp—so distant, that the tinge of kindred blood would never have been thought of, had Romulus Wellspring not been a five-fold millionaire. It was only when, in an humble, yet seemingly playful mood one day, the old lawyer

spread his carefully-arranged proofs before Wellspring, that the latter admitted the possibility of kinship.

"It may be, Cramp," was the careless reply. "Keep on claiming, if you find any pleasure in so doing. But don't take to building air-castles on the kinship. All the good you or yours will ever get out of me, lies in your skill at picking and stealing during my lifetime."

This was too blunt not to be genuine, and as Silas Cramp lived only for gold or its equivalent he turned his never idle wits into a different channel. He had some hopes of his son, Rufus, a fine, manly, handsome-looking fellow, fit to woo and win the proudest heiress in all the land, and setting the glorious prospect fairly before him, bade him make the most of his opportunity while Romulus Wellspring was absent from home. It would be none the harder task that Portia was ignorant of the very remote relationship.

Rufus was nothing loth, since Silas provided him with plenty of money the better to enable him to hold his own in the Southern capital; and had he possessed one-half the wits that filled that foxy head, he might have succeeded in his pursuit, for chance gave him a most favorable introduction to Portia Wellspring, and he was really a fine-looking fellow when sober and in good-humor.

Unluckily for Rufus, however, he happened to meet Portia in the city one afternoon, when his wits were all tangled up with strong drink and heavy losses at the gaming-table.

If he had accepted her first polite rebuff, all might have been well, even then, for drinking was no sin, if not actually fashionable in those days; but he was ever ugly in his cups, and insisted on her taking lunch with him. She refused, he insisted. The upshot was his actually trying to force her to comply, and his drunken grip on her arm was so severe as to draw a cry of pain from her paling lips.

Then—the ground seemed to fly up and strike Rufus full in the face, hurling him into the middle of the street!

He struggled to his feet, only to see Portia Wellspring hurrying away from a tall, graceful fellow, whose shining hat was lifted above his curling locks of jet, whose costume was rich and in the height of the then fashion. And as his hand mechanically sought his painfully smarting face, the red blood solved the mystery of his fall.

"Struck—you struck me, curse you!" Rufus snarled, viciously, diving a hand between his collar and the back of his neck, plucking forth a glittering blade, at the same time crouching for a leap upon the man who had disgraced him, according to manly etiquette.

"And I ask pardon of my glove for so dishonoring it, you cur!" the champion of beauty cried his eyes flashing, his lips curling as he turned upon the bleeding rascal.

"I'll cut your heart out for that blow!" grated Cramp, leaping forward, only to fling up his hand and shake his tingling fingers with a howl of mingled pain and rage.

His first and most natural impression, seeing a spout of smoke issue from the swiftly elevated hand of the other, and hearing a sharp report, was that his fingers had been shattered by the derringer ball. Instead, the bullet had torn the blade from his grasp by flattening on the steel against the guard, bits of lead breaking the skin of his hand and adding pain to the benumbing shock.

"Not with that knife, you cur," laughed the sharpshooter, mockingly, as the short but terribly effective weapon vanished from his hand, to be instantly replaced by a fresh one.

The street was fairly well occupied by citizens hurrying to and fro, all of whom were arrested by the sound of an affray, but not one offered to interfere. None of them had the authority even if the will was present, and there was no peace officer within sight.

And then, few men who knew him at all, would care to interfere with Duke Barringer when his blood was fairly aroused, as now. He was slow to rouse to fighting pitch, but when that happened, he had such a marvelous tact in handling his favorite weapons—neat, substantial tools which had given him his significant title of "Deadly Aim," and "The Duke of Derringers,"—that any sober man would prefer a little time to set his house in order before courting his fate.

More than half-drunk, partially blinded by the blood that flowed from his bruised nose and the clean cut under each eye, Rufus Cramp quickly recognized The Duke and shrunk back with an involuntary cry that was hardly one of deadly defiance.

The Duke laughed musically, but with contempt in every tone, as he saw this pitiful flinching. The derringer dropped from his hand and he stooped to pick up the slender, flexible cane which he had dropped on leaping to the rescue.

"I shall have to do penance for a month for stooping so low, you miserable cur," he said, his voice cold and cutting, distinctly audible to every one within eyeshot, advancing toward the shrinking wretch, his left hand closing on Cramp's collar, forcing him to obey the order given at the same time. "On your knees and

beg, you scoundrel! Swear you will never again dare to even accost that lady, much less insult her as you did a minute since! Down, I say!"

Powerless in that iron grip, Rufus Cramp was forced to his knees in the middle of the street, and then, amidst the laughter and cheers of the crowd, that limber cane fell in swift strokes, each one feeling like a rod of hot iron wrapping about his person. So intense was the pain, so thoroughly demoralized was the wretch by his double defeat, that his feeble remnant of manhood fled and he roared and begged for mercy.

The Duke of Derringers gave him a push that sent him sprawling in the dust, tossing both cane and gloves after him with a gesture of contempt, then turning on his heel and moving leisurely away, outwardly as cool and composed as ever.

This was the incident that Silas Cramp could never get his son to fully reveal, though common rumor spread the report until he gleaned a tolerably correct idea of what had really occurred. And this was why Rufus Cramp failed in his first stroke for the Wellspring millions.

Several times since then he had met Portia, but she, too, had heard how cravenly he had acted, and though she ever treated him with politeness, there was a sort of pitying contempt in her manner which Rufus was quick to detect, though, to do her justice, Portia strove to conceal the sentiment whenever thrown into his society.

Shortly after that, chance—or fate—threw Rufus into contact with Marcia Wellspring, the sole surviving member of the other branch, and almost before he was aware of his danger, he was over head and ears in love with the girl.

Only for his possessing considerable of the same avaricious spirit which moved all the actions of his father, Rufus would have pressed his suit more hotly, would have lost no time in making Marcia his wife; and this he might easily have done, just then. It was shortly after Silas Cramp paid her that warning visit, and she was feeling very lonesome, much discouraged, and found it only too easy to fall in love with this dashing young fellow. She did admit that his love was reciprocated, and would have cheerfully named the important day, but Rufus unaccountably refrained from pressing that delicate point. He was in love, and really wished nothing better than to marry Marcia, but—

While Rufus was dallying with his fate thus, chance again took a hand in the game, by throwing one of his intimate associates ashore at the little landing nearest the plantation where Marcia Wellspring lived. Chance brought Rufus to the landing, where he was somewhat embarrassed to meet and be recognized by his chum, Kyte Darley.

Of course there was nothing for it but to take Darley back to the plantation where he himself was staying; and of course southern hospitality made Marcia press the gentleman to stay.

Kyte Darley was nothing loth, for he had an eye for beauty, and Marcia was indeed beautiful in face and figure. And Marcia seemed to the full as much pleased with this tall, athletic Southerner, whose clear if dark complexion was so different from the sallowness so common among men of his race. There was a charm in his quiet, almost sleepy demeanor that seemed to soothe her fiery, impatient spirit. His voice was so musical, his politeness so flattering yet never obtrusive, his admiration so genuine, yet so modestly veiled!

All this Marcia frankly confided to Rufus, possibly in order to show him that there was yet a chance of his losing the prize he so vehemently vowed he most longed to possess, yet plainly shrunk from securing beyond all chance of losing, possibly because she was in sober earnest. Either way, she had the satisfaction of making him terribly jealous. Cutting his own visit short, he took Kyte Darley away with him, mentally vowing that he should never more invade his little Garden of Eden.

He returned at the first opportunity, resolved to dare all for the sake of love, but now it was Marcia's turn to fight shy. She would not listen to him when he begged her to name the day for their wedding. She insisted on his first bringing his father to see her, vowing that without his full approval, she would never marry the son. It would be a sin to bring disension into the family!

Of course Rufus refused to believe in this. She was fickle. She had fallen in love with that infernal blackleg, and caught at the first pretext to sever their engagement that she might turn to Darley. But she should never marry him! He should die the death of a dog! He would hunt him out and slay the villain!

And when he parted from Marcia, Rufus firmly resolved to do this, let the consequence be what it might. But little by little his valor oozed out at his finger-tips, and when he did meet Kyte Darley next it was simply to go on a howling spree with him, winding up with empty pockets and too-full head.

Long before this Silas Cramp had confided his deep-laid plans against the Wellspring millions to his son, who heartily coincided with all he

advanced. The prospect as presented by the cunning old lawyer was so brilliant that Rufus was intoxicated with it, and it was a fear of disarranging those visionary plans that made him shrink from wholly committing himself with Marcia.

Silas Cramp believed himself wholly in the confidence of Romulus Wellspring. He knew he had drawn up no will for him, nor did he for a moment believe one had been drawn at all, up to the hour when the sick man shattered all his brightest hopes by that peculiar revelation as described in the opening chapter.

Should the millionaire employ him to draw up a will, or should he die before making one, the course would be clear for the fraud. In Kyte Darley they possessed a jewel of skill with the pen. Time and again had they watched him dash off a perfect *fac-simile* of the millionaire's signature, until he was so perfectly trained that he could not possibly fail when the test came.

And so, when Romulus Wellspring was stricken down in the Queen City, Silas Cramp lost no time in summoning his son and ally to the spot, to be ready for any emergency. Never once did he suspect what that emergency would really prove to be; and it was with perfect confidence in their ultimate success that Silas Cramp began urging the sick man to set his house in order.

"Not that I really think you are in any particular danger, my dear sir," he said, in his softest, most obsequious tone. "But it is a duty you owe to yourself, to your daughter—to society, I might say."

And Romulus Wellspring only smiled or cursed him, according to the mood which was uppermost at the time, never once dropping a hint as to the scandalous truth.

Thus matters stood with the characters who are destined to figure prominently in this record of crime and avarice, of truth and loyalty.

Together Rufus Cramp and Kyte Darley stood on the hurricane deck of the good packet *Mississippi Belle*, early on the morning following that consultation in the dingy little office. They were watching for the appearance of Silas Cramp, who had promised to run down with word as to how the sick man was progressing. The boat was just ready to start. The hands were throwing off the huge cables that held her to the steep, rock-paved wharf. All but a single plank had been hauled in. The steam was coughing from the 'scape-pipes, the wheels were slowly revolving, when—

"Yonder he comes!" muttered Darley. "Too late! We're off!"

Silas Cramp was running when first seen, but as the boat began to swing around, he paused, waving his hand, smiling brightly.

"It's all right!" breathed Rufus, greatly relieved.

"But how right? Dead, or still living?" softly breathed Darley.

CHAPTER III.

MISCHIEF BREWING.

"LOSING your nerve!"

So clear and distinct the words sounded that Marmaduke Barringer actually started up in bed and glanced fiercely about his chamber, one of his pet weapons magically appearing in his hot grasp, ready to wipe out the vile insult in the gore of his traducer.

A flush that was almost of shame crept over his handsome features as his head dropped back on the pillow, and the short laugh that parted his lips was purely mechanical. He was the sole occupant of his chamber. No one had spoken aloud. He was his own accuser, and the words that had seemed to ring upon his hearing, had simply flashed across his sleepless brain.

Was the charge true? Was he indeed beginning to lose the matchless nerve which had long since rendered him noted among his class? Through which he had risen from the lowest strata to the "top notch" of his peculiar circle?

The hot flush was gone now, and Duke Barringer lay quiet enough in his bed as he put these questions, as he forced himself to look the serious charge full in the face.

Several hours had passed since he doffed his clothes and dropped upon the bed. All that time he had been wooing slumber, unsuccessfully, with his usual resolution not to be worsted, to force the drowsy god's embraces. More than once before this he had found it impossible to get asleep when reason told him his body needed rest, but he had abandoned the effort without a second thought. Why could he not do so now? Was it because he was beginning to doubt himself?

That was the disagreeable sticking point to which his busy brain ever returned.

Had he been doing anything to task his brain after an unusual fashion? Let him think!

It was broad daylight when he entered his chamber, but that was nothing out of the way. He was one of the human owls who labor while the rest of mankind slumber. He had been playing, a heavy game, too: but that was nothing unusual for him. He had suffered no heavy losses, had made no great gains. He had played

with men whose every point he knew, whose game was perfectly familiar to him. Nothing in all this to drive sleep away from his eyes.

Nothing particularly exciting had transpired the day before, unless—

He had met her—Miss Portia Wellspring.

"What of it?" and this time the words were actually pronounced by the gambler's red lips. "Am I a fool? Am I such a poor witling as to lose my nerve over a pretty face? Am I mad enough to fall in love with a star, and then lose my nerve because I can't stretch out my hand and pluck the brilliant from its setting?"

And even as he muttered thus indignantly, Duke Barringer flushed anew, for deep down in his heart of hearts he knew that he had been guilty of just such miserable folly.

If not, why did his thoughts turn so persistently toward the fair vision which had met his eager gaze that bright afternoon? What else caused her lovely countenance to rise so often between him and his cards that night? Why did he hear over and over again, as he lay there on his bed, vainly striving to lose his senses in sleep, her soft, musical notes as she thanked him for picking up and restoring a small package which she had inadvertently dropped? It was but an instant that they stood face to face, yet had his brain been a camera, it could not have taken a more accurate picture of her, to the slightest details of her dress, away with him.

Duke Barringer, as he lay on his bed, forced himself to look the matter squarely in the face, pitilessly unmasking each subterfuge put forward by his wounded pride and self-love. Slow to rouse, those who knew him best would tell you, but once fairly afoot, the Duke of Derringers never stopped by the wayside, but went straight and sure as fate to the goal, bound to win or to die trying. And so it was now. He had never permitted himself to think of Portia Wellspring as one who might be wooed and won. Until this hour, he had never acknowledged even in his own heart that he had learned to love her.

Step by step he reviewed the past, even to the day when he had rendered her that service in the long ago, striving honestly to point out the date on which that madly preposterous passion first sent out its feeble roots, but without success.

"It was not then, for I didn't know who she was at that time," he muttered, frowning at his defeat. "Not until the story spread over town and got into the papers. Even then I could not have sworn that she was beautiful or the reverse."

Honestly he sought for the starting-point, but in the end he was sure of but one thing—that he loved Portia Wellspring with the love of a lifetime.

"It might as well be the moon!" he muttered, in disgust at his supreme folly.

This was his dogged conclusion after honestly weighing all the facts of the case from an impartial standpoint.

He knew Romulus Wellspring by sight and by reputation. He knew that the millionaire was proud and a bit of an aristocrat, despite his bluff manners and rough-and-ready air. He knew that, in all other respects a man of the world, Wellspring never touched a card, even in sport, never bet a dollar on a race, and that he scorned all so-called sporting men.

"The old money-bags would sooner send his darling after her kindred than see her mated with a sport. Don't you know that, Duke of Fools and Prince of Idiots?" muttered the gambler, in self-disgust.

True as Holy Writ, but Romulus Wellspring was already old. He could not expect to live for many years longer. Then—then—

"His blood is in her veins, and she is even prouder than he. Even if she had no guide, no master but her own sweet will, she would never stoop to your level, King of the Long-Eared Tribe!"

Worse than all, Duke felt that this was simple truth.

Without understanding himself, he arrived at this conclusion. He was a gambler, who lived by his wits, his skill, his trained nerves. He had shed blood on more than one occasion, as a matter of course. No man could reach his position at the top of the tree without having his progress stubbornly disputed. He had ruined more than one man in his time. He had doubtless caused much misery in happy homes, as every successful gambler necessarily must.

But he had never done so maliciously. Proud of his natural talent for cards, he had carefully cultivated it until he found far more pleasure in plucking a hawk than a pigeon. If he had ruined men, it was in pitched battles where they would only too gladly have served him the same way, had luck or fate so decided.

After all, there were many worse men in the world than Duke Barringer, and, gambler though he was, many who would have been far less fitting mates for the proud heiress to the Wellspring millions. Yet he told himself that this mad folly must stop right where he now found it. For her sake, as much as for his own.

"I might make her trouble, but what would that profit me? I would still be a gambler, beyond the pale. Duke, my boy, you've got to

bunch the cards and start in on a new deal with a clean deck!"

Hardly had the gentleman sport come to this conclusion, when he heard quick footsteps in the corridor without, then the sound of a key turning in a lock, after which two men entered the room adjoining the one he occupied.

There was nothing unusual in this, for he was only one guest of a large hotel, where men and women were constantly going and coming, but though he believed he was firmly resolved to smother his wild passion, Duke was only human, and it was much more comfortable to idly lie and listen to the shuffling, indistinct sounds beyond than to pursue his unpalatable self-examination further, just then.

"Shoe-string Johnny," he murmured, remembering who occupied the room adjoining his. "He must have struck a lead lately. He was playing a peg or two above his usual notch last night, if I recollect aright."

There were few professionals in active life with whom The Duke was not more or less intimately acquainted, and he knew this John Mack for a reckless, degraded hanger-on at the gaming-table, whose peculiar nickname may be briefly explained.

John Mack came of a wealthy, proud race, and when but a very young man was left a large fortune, unluckily for himself. There was gambling blood in his veins, and before the year was out, he had not a dollar left which he could call his own. He lived only for gambling, and as often as he could gather up a small stake, he risked it at the board.

With all his faults, he had one redeeming trait. He honestly tried to pay his debts, and whenever he chanced to make a considerable winning, he at once discharged these obligations as far as possible, and at the same time leave himself five or ten dollars with which to once more tempt fortune. Of course, if he lost this small sum, he was forced to draw out of the game until he could beg, borrow, or otherwise obtain another trifling stake. But if, on the contrary, he won, knowing that at the best he had but a trifle to lose, he would press fortune to the uttermost while it favored him, often leaving off far "ahead of the game." Before the money could grow cold in his pockets, he would pay off his most pressing debts, returning to the tables to renew his "shoe-string" game.

It was this that gave him his unenviable title, and the very fact that a table can win but a trifle from a player of that caliber at one time, while it may lose a large sum, makes gamblers of that class the dregs of the profession.

Duke Barringer, now that he was no longer courting the coy god, was almost falling asleep when a coarse laugh from the other room caused his eyes to open, and when a name came to his ears—the name of the fellow whom he had flogged for insulting Portia Wellspring—his every sense was on the full alert.

"Rufus Cramp, eh?" repeated the coarse voice, which Duke fancied he could recognize. "Two to one there's a woman in the case, then!"

"You're right, and big money, too, if we play our cards adroitly," returned Shoe-string Johnny, in a more guarded voice. "There's a good stake for a starter, and a glorious chance for a whipsaw before the game is called for good."

"Both ends against the middle, eh?"

"Something like it," laughed Mack, lightly.

"No—"

The hiatus was readily filled by the imagination of the now interested listener on the further side of the thin partition, and that he was right, the next words proved.

"Nothing so nasty as that, Tom," hastily uttered Mack, with a little shiver in his tones.

"Tom Kearney, for a ducat!" murmured the Duke of Derringers, beneath his breath.

He knew the fellow named by sight and reputation alone. Not a gambler, though he occasionally paid the tables a visit. Rather a thug and desperado of the lowest class. A fellow who would steal out from some dark corner to garrote an unsuspecting victim. Who would slit the throat of a woman or a child for a few dollars. But one whose low coming had thus far kept him out of the clutches of the law, much to the disgust of the police who had watched him so long and longingly.

"A case off running off a shy damsel, then?" persisted Kearney.

Duke listened breathlessly for the answer, but no audible one came to his ears. Perhaps Shoe-string Johnny contented himself with nodding assent, for Kearney laughed again as he said:

"An heiress, then, or that white-livered cur wouldn't dare run the risk. He's no good! I'd rather work for almost any other man."

"Money talks, Tom, and when it passes into your pocket, you can't tell whose hands it came from, by smell or feeling. Still, if you don't want to go into the job, there's no bones broke. I can get—"

"Go into it? Why not? Think I'd go back on a pard like you, old fellow?" briskly interposed the ruffian, the smack of his broad palm, as it crossed that of the gambler, being distinctly audible in the next room. "Count me in, head and ears! An heiress, you say? Not the heiress? Not old—"

"No names, curse you!" grated Mack, in an angry tone, lowering his voice until only preternaturally sharpened ears like those of the man in the adjoining room could have distinguished the words. "There may be ears about. The devil!" with a sharp aspiration, as though the fellow was just struck by a particularly disagreeable recollection. "The next room belongs to The Duke!"

"Whose great-grandfather is he?" growled Kearney, but in a much lowered tone. "When that high-toned squirt sticks his nose into my affairs, there'll be a deal in wax precious soon after, mind that!"

By this time The Duke was out of bed, with his ear pressed lightly against the thin partition, fairly holding his breath lest he lose an important word or sentence. Thus, though the two plotters had dropped their voices far below their natural pitch, the gentleman sport had little difficulty in catching all that had passed between them.

"You can have the whole pie, mate," and The Duke smiled grimly as he imagined what a shrug accompanied those magnanimous words. "When I knowingly rub up against the Duke of Derringers, I want to have my will signed in advance."

"It's just such milk-and-water coves as you that makes him so terribly high-and-mighty," growled Kearney. "Who elected him cock of the walk? When did he fight for the title?"

"Not you, certainly!"

"Perhaps you think I ain't good enough leather for him? Maybe—"

"You can't quarrel with me, Tom, so spare your breath," quietly retorted Mack. "There's no money in that for either of us. I'm free to own that The Duke holds over me, every time, but you needn't follow my lead unless it pleases you."

"That's all right, pard, just so you don't ask me to crow his song. Drop it, and let's get down to plain business."

"If I only knew The Duke was out of his room, or sound asleep!" muttered Shoe-string Johnny.

"If we don't mention names, what matter?"

"But we have mentioned names—worse luck!" irritably retorted the other plotter. "Enough to set that devil on a hot scent if we are to follow the play marked out by—you know!"

There was a slight pause, accompanied by the sound of muffled footsteps, then a faint scratching noise against the partition. The Duke smiled faintly as he divined the truth. The men were listening for some sounds to tell them whether the room was occupied.

"I can't hear anything," came presently to his ears. "If he ain't out, he's sleeping too soundly to even snore!"

"Or listening, just as we are!"

"Well, what of it?" impatiently muttered Kearney. "We can hunt another hole to do our talking in, can't we?"

"Not if Barringer is in there," firmly added Mack, speaking with more distinctness than before. "If he is, I'm going to drop the game like a red-hot potato!"

"Then where'll I come in at?" indignantly muttered his mate.

"Where you can. Try the boss yourself, but don't ask me to play a hand. 'I'm not worth much, I know, but I value myself too highly to go bucking against a stone wall like that.'"

"If I didn't know you so well, pard, I'd swear you was a coward."

"Swear it to yourself, then," a little sharply. "That will be the safest way. If I do say it myself, there's only one man in all Orleans that I'm really afraid of: and that isn't you, Tom."

"Maybe he ain't in, after all. It's worth trying for, anyhow. Why not take a sly peep? There's a transom over his door, isn't there?"

"My head wouldn't fit in it if there is," was the grim retort. "You can try it on, if you're so mighty hot for a row with The Duke."

"If I knew him as well as you do, I wouldn't mind. You say you're going to drop it all if the fellow is in there?"

"Dead sure I am!"

"Then, if he's listening, he knows that much, for you spoke loud enough to waken a sleeping man. He don't know me by my voice. I'll tell you what I'll do: you go and knock him up, if he is in there. You can think up some excuse, can't you?"

"I might," dryly. "I owe him a few dollars. I might hand him that, I suppose."

"Good enough!" muttered Kearney, cheerily. "If he isn't in, no matter; we're all hunk. If he is, you can draw out, and I'll take the job on my own hook and give you a good interest in the proceeds. How's that suit you?"

Duke Barringer failed to catch the reply, if there was any, for he cautiously drew back from his listening attitude, casting a swift, comprehensive glance about his little chamber.

Clearly the persuasions of Tom Kearney in the end overcome the prudent fears of his comrade in evil, for shortly after he made his business-like proposition, the door of the adjoining chamber cautiously opened, and a head was thrust out, keen eyes roving swiftly along the narrow corridor.

There was no one visible in either direction,

and after a brief hesitation, Shoe-string Johnny wholly emerged from the room, and the red, bloated, evil face of Tom Kearney filled the place his own had recently occupied.

"All serene, eh? No one afoot? That's hearty! Prepare to pay your honest debts, pard; but here's hoping you won't have a chance to do it this turn!"

Advice easy enough to give, but not so easy for Shoe-string Johnny to follow. He really respected and admired the Duke of Derringers, only less than he feared his enmity. But he knew, too, that in case his fears were confirmed, there would be far less danger in backing out than in keeping on after all that had been so incautiously uttered.

Secretly resolved to save himself by making full confession in case Duke Barringer should answer his summons, Mack advanced and softly tapped at the closed door. No answer came. Again he rapped, this time louder than before, but the result was the same.

He stepped back with a little shiver, feeling as though a bullet might at any moment tear its way through the frail barrier; but Tom Kearney, grinning widely, tip-toed out of the other room, saying:

"You're satisfied now, ain't you? If he was in there, he wouldn't stand all that hammering. Let's get back to business."

But Mack shook his head, doubtingly. He could not get over the fancy that there was a trap under this silence.

Kearney ground out an ugly oath.

"It wouldn't take much to make me think you want to freeze me out of this little snap, Johnny! If I did—"

A swift stride carried Mack to his side, his face flushing, his dark eyes aglow as he gripped an arm tightly, muttering:

"You're so mighty bold, do the rest yourself."

There's the room, and the transom is open, as you can see. Crawl up there and take a look for yourself. If The Duke isn't in, then I'll talk all the business you like."

Though he spoke so earnestly, his voice was far too low for even a sound to pass beyond the closed door.

Kearney turned a shade less florid, and his smile was rather a sickly one, but he did not hesitate long. To do him justice, he was possessed of brute courage enough, else he would never have lived up to the words he then uttered:

"Give me a lift, and I'll do it!"

"And get a bullet through your empty skull for pay?"

"Two can play at that game, Johnny," slipping a revolver from its secret pocket. "Give us a back, and mind you don't slip or scratch on the door. Unless he's watching for just such a trick, I'll have the drop on him before he knows it!"

Shoe-string Johnny yielded, though with many misgivings as to the result. Still, it would not make matters much worse for him, should The Duke really be on the alert and listening. Kearney would surely take the first bullet, and he might leap out of range before a second messenger could tear its way through the closed door.

Stealing forward he braced his hands on his knees, arching his back and bowing his head, while Kearney silently slipped off his boots.

Light as a cat the desperado climbed upon his living footstool, pistol cocked and ready for a snap shot in case of need, holding his breath for a moment as he crouched beneath the open transom. Then, with swift celerity, he raised his head and took in the whole interior at a single glance, ready to duck or shoot as occasion might warn him.

Instead, he kept his position, sweeping the room more thoroughly with his eager glances, even going so far as to thrust his head through the opening, to make sure the Duke of Derringers was not lurking in one of the corners out of his first range of vision.

To all appearance the chamber was wholly unoccupied.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DUKE GROWS INTERESTED.

"STEADY, pard, unless you want to see me hung before my time!" Tom Kearney muttered, warningly, as he felt his support waver a little.

Strive all he might, Shoe-string Johnny was unable to drive away the disagreeable fancy that the Duke of Derringers was at that moment calculating the precise point in the door through which he must send a bullet in order to insure its most effective work. Perhaps that was the reason why the shot had not come before. The Duke was waiting for clumsy Tom to stick his head through the narrow transom, when the abrupt deprivation of his foot-rest would play the part of hangman and thus kill two birds with the one bullet. Ugh!

"Brace up a bit, Johnny," added the spy, his voice telling his confederate that his head was now fairly through the opening. "It's all right, I reckon! The critter ain't to home, unless he's so bad scared he's shrunk enough to crawl into the water pitcher over yonder!"

"You're certain?" quavered Mack, still with that strange, unaccountable sensation of being

under fire, of having his life held at the fingertip of the surest man with a derringer in all the South. "You can find no signs of his having been in the room?"

"Slide up and take a squint for yourself, pard," laughed Kearney, as he withdrew his head and dropped silently, cat-like, to the floor. "Maybe I'm going blind. Maybe I can't tell a man when I see it. Maybe I'm the fool and you're the man of sound horse-sense. But it would call for a monstrous heap of mighty keen arguing to make me believe one or t'other, now I tell ye!"

Thus the red-headed ruffian grunted while pulling on his boots, but still Shoe-string Johnny was not satisfied. It could hardly be possible that Tom Kearney had overlooked a man the size of The Duke, and yet—

"Some one occupied the room last night, for the bed has been slept in," added Kearney, straightening up and giving his trousers a settling shake by way of completing his toilet. "If it was Barringer, he must have pulled out before we come in."

"I could have sworn he was in there—I can almost take oath to that effect now!" muttered Mack, uneasily, glancing up at the transom.

His companion gave a snort of disgust, then planted himself against the chamber door, growling:

"Shin up and look for yourself, then! Satan twirl me on his spit! if ever the likes o' you crossed my suit before to-day! Up ye go!"

Shoe-string Johnny hesitated a moment. He felt that The Duke *must* be within the room. Instinct, superstition, *something* told him this, directly in the face of reason. What if the gentleman sport was simply biding his time until his face should show itself through the transom as a fitting target for one of those big-mouthed derringers?

"Up, if you're going to!" grunted Kearney, with a twist of his red face and side glance from his bleared blue eyes. "Want to keep on this way until some one catches us didoeing about another gent's room?"

Impulsively Shoe-string Johnny crept up the broad back and stood on the massive shoulders, his pale face on a level with the open transom, his wildly dilated eyes taking in at a single glance the major part of the room. He fully expected to see the Duke of Derringers standing at ease, smiling coldly at his jetty eyes glanced over a leveled pistol. Instead, he saw a room in disorder, just as it might have been left by one who had passed a night in slumber there.

The bed was rumpled, the covers thrown down and back. There was water in the wash bowl standing beside the pitcher. But that was all.

There were no garments on the chair or floor, no boots near the bed. He could see half-way under that frail article of furniture, and felt that even a cat could not be sheltered from observation there.

Still he was not content. That mysterious premonition of evil and disaster still assailed him. He searched the walls for a closet door, but none was visible. He thrust his head through the transom, and carefully inspected the two corners which at first were beyond his range of vision, just as Tom Kearney had done before him. Like Tom, he failed to detect aught suspicious, and like Tom he dropped silently to the floor, convinced at last that his fears had no foundation in truth.

"You're the hardest fellow to satisfy that I ever met!" grunted the red-headed desperado as he drew his massive form erect and moved toward the other room. "You are satisfied, I suppose?"

"I've got to be," rather doggedly returned Shoe-string Johnny.

"Anyway, just so we can get back to the business you jumped in such a hurry to go hunting for mare's nests. I'm getting hungry for a square bite at that precious pie!" chuckled Kearney.

"Look out that the first mouthful don't choke you!" muttered Mack, as he followed Tom into the room, closing the door and turning the key in the lock with vicious emphasis.

The click was sharp enough to penetrate the adjoining room, and as though this was the signal for which he waited, Marmaduke Barringer pushed aside the clothes hanging over the foot of the bed and silently stole out of his hiding-place!

He had heard just enough to wish to hear more, and when the plotters in the adjoining room spoke of investigation, a single glance showed the gentleman sport his one chance of escaping detection.

Silently gathering up his clothes and boots, he crept under the low bed, curling up near the foot and against the wall, where the carelessly disposed coverlet and sheet would aid in concealing him from the eyes of any one peering through the transom. His door was locked and bolted, and of course the plotters would not dare attempt forcing it open. If they tried burglar arts—well, the police would find Tom Kearney ready for their clutches, and Shoe-string Johnny might get a scare sufficient to bring forth the whole truth.

Leaving his garments beneath the bed, in case it should become necessary to beat a hasty retreat to that refuge, Barringer stole to the partition, lightly pressing his keenest ear against it, eager to learn more about Rufus Cramp and his coveted heiress.

"So the gay and festive Rufus is going in for big money, is he?" were the first words the eavesdropper caught with any distinctness.

"I didn't ask him what he was going in for," snapped Shoe-string Johnny, who had not yet entirely recovered his usual equanimity. "I was flat on my back when he came to me and gave me a stake that I knew meant a game bigger than ordinary, and when he told me that this was only a starter, you can bet high I didn't want to ask any questions that might close the bank before I could draw out another stack."

"Of course; you ain't a fool. It takes you, Johnny."

Tom Kearney was not above descending to flattery when he thought he could benefit his own pockets thereby.

"I'm glad you've changed your mind," snapped Mack, sourly.

"Don't hold a grudge, mate," soothingly added the red-head. "You must admit that you did act precious cranky just a bit ago."

"And I feel the same way yet, worse luck!" irritably cried the petty gambler, the bed creaking sharply, as though he was unable to sit or lie still.

"Want another squint through the headlight?" laughed Kearney. "If so, I'll play step-ladder again. Anything to keep peace and quietness in the family."

"I know the Duke isn't in there, and yet—I feel just as though those infernal eyes of his were looking me through and through. For little I'd drop the game and sell it all out to him!"

"Better take a last look around town first," coldly uttered Tom Kearney. "You'll want to change your stamping grounds soon after."

"You threaten me?"

"I was thinking mainly of young Cramp. They say his ill-will is mighty unhealthy."

Shoe-string Johnny laughed contemptuously.

"Duke Barringer wouldn't say so! He flogged Cramp like an egg-sucking cur, and has never lost a moment's sleep on that account."

The Duke of Derringers bit his lip sharply, a dubious smile curling his red lips for an instant. Though not exactly on account of the hatred which Rufus Cramp must naturally feel for his castigator, much sleeplessness had come of that very flogging.

"The sport isn't trying to get even on her, is he?" It isn't that heiress he's playing for?" asked Kearney, dropping the other point as one that could bring him no benefit.

Breathlessly Duke listened for the answer. If any was given, it must have been by way of signs, not in speech, for not a sound could he distinguish. And Tom Kearney uttered the next words:

"Well, I glory in his spunk, anyway, whether he wins or loses. As for me, I'm in the game to stay. Just tell me the part I'm to play, and consider it carried out clean and smooth, even to slitting a throat, if orders go that far."

"It's not quite so bad as that," hastily interposed Shoe-string Johnny. "If we can do our work short of that, so much the better."

"It's all one to me," carelessly. "The heavier the work, the bigger the pay, of course."

"There's risk, of course, or he wouldn't come to me for help, or be so free with his ducats. If we get caught at it, it may end in—"

Again Duke failed to catch the conclusion.

"That's counted in the bill, of course. Maybe we can rig up a little row on our own account when the work is done, to give us a fair excuse for striking his ribs a trifle harder. Eh?"

"There'll be more than one payment, of course," laughed Shoe-string Johnny, significantly.

"Her fortune our bank, and Rufus the cashier, eh?"

"That goes without saying; now listen and I'll face the cards for your inspection."

"The job is to come up this very night. You and I—two is enough to turn the trick, since the cards will be put up for us—are to rig up in regular high-toby style, with masks, weapons, terrible voices, and all that. We are to waylay the carriage and stop it just as though we meant sober business."

"But I thought you hinted—"

"So I did; but, curse it all! can't you take a hint instead of putting it into plain words?" angrily muttered Shoe-string Johnny.

"I like plain talk when there's no danger of other ears catching it! Then there's no danger of botching a job through only partly understanding just what is wanted," retorted Kearney.

"Come closer, then, if you must have every syllable spelled out in full. Curse it all!" and there was a perceptible shiver in his tones. "I feel all the time as though there was some one listening to us!"

"Duke Barringer, eh? Maybe some of his old clothes are in the other room. Shall I go and toss them out the window?" sneered the coarser-nerved rascal.

For all that, the listener could hear him rise from the chair he occupied and seat himself on the bed. Then, dimly, indistinctly, he heard the plotters conversing, but in tones so low and guarded that he could only catch here and there a disconnected word.

In vain he held his breath and strained his sense of hearing. He could not hear enough to give him more than a vague clew to the plot, and even that would have been lost only for what had gone before.

Nearly another hour was spent thus, when the two plotters rose from the bed and left the room, Duke Darringer listening with bated breath to their echoing footsteps along the corridor until they died away down the uncarpeted stairs.

His face was pale and hard-set as he turned toward his clothes, silently dressing himself. His black eyes gleamed and glittered. His teeth were clinched with stern determination. Shoe-string Johnny might well have trembled in his boots could he have seen The Duke just then.

While dressing, Duke concisely summed up the points he had caught.

Rufus Cramp was playing a bold game to win an heiress, or else to remove one forever from his path. He was to be riding with her that same night in a carriage. Outside of the city, since Shoe-string Johnny and Tom Kearney were to play masked robbers. The carriage was to be halted, the inmates robbed—in pretense, at least. A woman was to be—

There he was forced to stop. Something was to be done to a woman, most likely the heiress. Abducted? Why so, if she was with Cramp of her own free will? Murdered? Shoe-string Johnny had distinctly cried out against this supposition; but was he in earnest? Might he not be holding back the worst until fully assured that Kearney would not fly the track?

Was this heiress that to the Wellspring millions?

"If you're thinking of troubling that angel of light again, look out for yourself, Rufus Cramp!" the Duke of Derringers grated betwixt his teeth, his black eyes all aglow. "What I gave you then, won't be a marker to your reward now!"

Just above his breath Barringer muttered these words, but if he had pealed them forth at the top of his voice, they could not have expressed a more deadly determination.

Forgotten now was his recent vow to forget all about Portia Wellspring. He felt that she was in imminent peril, from which he alone could save her. For the second time. Perhaps—

He sprang to his feet, his handsome face flushing hotly at the thought that stole into his brain. And yet—such things had happened before: why not again?

The wild fancy would not down at his bidding, though Duke believed he was honestly trying to smother it forever. He was past denying his love for Portia, and he could not help wondering if there was not a chance of her forgetting the vast distance between them, socially and morally, when he had once more saved her from—what?

"I'll find out, or cash my checks in trying!" he muttered, putting on his hat and unlocking the door.

Excited though his brain was, he did not forget that the suspicious Johnny Mack might still be lying in wait below stairs in order to solve those strange premonitions which had so troubled him awhile in the room adjoining. But he knew, too, from their talk, that the dark job was to take place some distance out of the city, and that if he was to act with anything like a full knowledge of the actual facts, he must get quickly to work.

"If the rascal is there, and sees me come down, I'll freeze on to him with a grip he'll hate worse than death!" grimly muttered the Duke of Derringers as he passed along the corridor and descended to the hotel office.

No one who saw him then could even have suspected all that was going on below that smooth, smiling, bland surface. The Duke was just the same as he ever was when away from the gaming-tables: a polished, suave, yet dignified gentleman.

At the present day, his "get up" would excite curiosity, if not derision. Then, his garb was in the height of style. Tall hat, shining glossily, with perfectly straight brim, very narrow, while the crown, if anything, grew narrower at the top rather than flaring. A light cloak flung gracefully over his left shoulder. Ruffled shirt front, fully exposed by the low-cut vest, secured simply by two buttons at the bottom. Trowsers strapped tightly over the long, flat-toed patent-leather boots.

In figure, Duke Barringer was tall, athletic, without being heavily built. His waist seemed unusually small, from his coat being secured only at that point, spreading open to afford his finely starched ruffles ample room for display. His hands and feet were small and shapely, showing no signs of hard labor.

His hair was jet-black, glossy and curling naturally, worn long and simply pushed back of his ears. His eyes were large, yet unusually

keen and penetrating, though now only the blandest good nature beamed from them as he glanced carelessly about the office. His complexion was clear and pure as that of a maiden in the bloom of youth, showing no signs of late hours, devoid of the peculiar pallor which marks the majority of gamblers.

At that date, few men wore beards and fewer still hair on their upper lips, but The Duke was an exception. His beard was worn full, and fell in glossy ripples to his chest.

That careless glance showed The Duke that Shoe-string Johnny was not in sight, and as he moved up to the railing behind which the clerk was smiling genially, he uttered a few commonplace words before asking:

"By the way—has any gentleman been inquiring for The Duke, this morning?"

"Not to my knowledge," was the prompt response.

Duke laughed softly.

"So? Probably it slipped his mind. Come to think, he was rather far gone, last night, when the appointment was made. No matter. I dare say I'll meet him outside."

Satisfied so far, the gentleman sport turned away and left the hotel. Shoe-string Johnny had either been convinced by his sight of an empty chamber, or else had forgotten to make any inquiries at the office as to what time The Duke had left his room.

For all his outward carelessness, Barringer was busily thinking over his best course to pursue. His first step seemed clear enough, and as soon as he could do so without appearing in a hurry, he proceeded direct to a livery stable situated only a few blocks away from his hotel.

"The top o' the marning to ye, sor," cheerily cried the proprietor of the establishment, quite an extensive one, by the way.

Though Murtogh Murphy was rapidly making a fortune, and might even now be considered a rich man, the same tact that had won this eminence kept him genially obsequious to a customer like The Duke. It seemed pure native politeness that made him quit his lounging attitude in the open door of his office and lift his hat clear of his shaggy red hair, as Barringer drew near.

"The same to you, Murphy," pleasantly responded the gambler. "My nag in order, I suppose?"

"Foine as a fiddle, sor, barrin' the tear in the swate oye av him for longin' to be showin' himself on the road this day, wid two nate legs on the soides av him, an' a sate in the saddle that knows how to fitly show off the paces av a thrue gintleman's nag, sor! An' divil blame him for that same faalin' sor! Sure, doesn't the cunnin' crayture well know that it's one oye for him an' two for his masther that the dear ladies on the road has, all the toime? Divil a lie in that, honey, now!"

Duke laughed softly. He was used to the cunning blarney of the Irishman, and he knew that any disclaimer would but double the dose.

"I have rather neglected the poor fellow, of late, but business has been pressing me. Even now I don't know as I could have found time to drop around this way, only—Rufus Cramp keeps his saddle horse here yet, I believe?"

"He does that, sor, an' a foine bit av blood it is, too. Av the masther was ownly a bit more—But ye wor sayin', sor?"

Duke smiled again. Rufus was no favorite with the worthy stable-keeper, though Murphy was always polite and suave enough to his face.

"I had some thoughts of taking the brute, if a fair look confirmed the opinion I had formed of him, on the road. I rather expected to meet Mr. Cramp here this morning."

"See the crooked luck av it, now!" exclaimed Murphy, his broad face lengthening, one hand vigorously scratching his tousled head. "Sure, sor, it wasn't longer ago than the len'th av a billy goat's tail—an' that's moighty short measure, honey!—that Misther Cramp was darkenin' this very dure wid his own body! Him a-goin' for to mate a gintleman loike your haner, an' for all, roidin' off loike—well, well! the loike av that I niver axperienced in the whole coorse av me loife! Fer a cruiked pickayune it's Murtogh Murphy w'd be afther politely axin' him w'd he go to the divil wid his cush-ton afther this—so I w'd now, an' divil a lie in the lave av it all!"

"Not on my account, Murphy," laughed Barringer. "After all, another day will do for the trade. Unless—riding, you say? On the road, of course?" he added, musingly.

"It's a long ride you'd take befure maatin' him, honey!"

"Not gone on a journey?"

"A thrip, yer haner. Out to Fairview, no less!"

"Old Wellspring's place, you mean?"

"The place that wor his, I mane. The place that is the foine leddy's now—the same that wor the manes av introducin' the cane av yer haner an' the back av that same young Cramp—divil cramp him!"

Despite his remarkable control over his face, Duke Barringer could not help betraying his astonishment at these words. But apparently Murphy failed to see this, as he was lugubriously shaking his head and muttering.

"An' me lyin' aslape loike a fattenin' hog, whin it's the best t'um on the two hands av me I'd a' gev to see that same divarshin! The crooked luck that kapes poilin' an' top av some poor divils! An' it's me they tell he roared an' danced an' capered most beautifully!"

"I hardly understand you, Murphy," slowly uttered Barringer, finding it difficult work to keep his tones steady and even.

"Is it the sthory that comes from up the river, your hanner?"

"Your manner of speaking about Fairview. Of course the lady is heiress to it, as well as all the other property belonging to old Wellspring, but—"

"That *wanst* belonged to him, your hanner," corrected Murphy, with a low bow.

"What! you don't mean to say that he's dead?" ejaculated Duke, his pupils dilating strongly.

"Sure, sor, 'tisn't the loikes av Murtoogh Murphy w'u'd say onythin' conthrary to your likin', but that's the sthory that come down-river this same night that's last past. An' more be token, I'm thinkin' that Misther Cramp himsilf was the missinger! Annyway, it was somethin' loike that he dhropped whin waitin' fer his nag, though av it was to mate your hanner here he agreed, mebbe it was a lie he lied."

"You are positive you could not have mistaken his meaning?" persisted Duke, strangely agitated for a man of his mental caliber.

"Divil a mistake, sor, onless the gintlemon made it himsilf be way av a lie, just to kape his slippery tongue in practice. It was 'Hustle out me boss, Murphy, quick as the divil'll let ye do it! It's bad news I'm carryin', no less!' An' av he wasn't glad to be the mail, sor, it's the first toime Murtoogh Murphy made so wide a guess at so plain a mark. Bad news, says he! An' ye c'u'd see the laugh stickin' out av the two eyes av him—longer than a fut, so ye c'u'd!"

"But he told you—"

"That he must make haste to Fairview, sor. That he was hurryin' to fetch back Miss Wellspring to catch the boat that pulls out the morn', sor. That it was to go an' resave the lasht blessin' av her father, sor, who lay dead an' cowlid in St. Louey, he was to take her, sor. An' me hurryin' the slowest I knowed how, sor, to putt aff the bitther black sorrow he was makin' such haste to pour out on the poor leddy, sor—divil break him up fer kindlin' wood!" spluttered Murphy, divided by curiosity regarding the strange agitation shown by Duke, his sorrow for the fatherless, and hatred toward the man who seemed in such haste to deliver the fatal message.

With an effort Barringer regained control over his features, and questioned the Irishman more closely concerning what Cramp had let drop. In the end he was convinced that Murphy was speaking the plain truth: that Rufus Cramp had distinctly announced the sudden death of Romulus Wellspring, that he was bound for Fairview to escort Miss Wellspring to town, that they were to take the boat leaving for up-river in the morning.

"The blow will prove a severe one to more than that poor girl," he said gravely, as he grasped the reins of his horse, which a groom at that moment led to the door. "It shocked even me, though I generally have pretty steady nerves. Long ago, the old gentleman did me a great favor, and I have not forgotten it yet."

"He was moighty koin'd an' ginerous, sor, so I've been tould," bowed Murphy, hastening to hold the gambler's stirrup. "May the Hivens be his bed, an' may Pather sind some av his spare angels to wipe the wet oyes av the swate leddy left behind!"

Duke Barringer swung himself into the saddle and rode away.

CHAPTER V.

FLUTTERING INTO THE SNARE.

APPARENTLY Rufus Cramp had had time to expend or conquer the heartless pleasure which had given the worthy stable-keeper such offense, for as he drew rein before the house at Fairview his face was grave, even a little pale and worn, while if anything "stuck out of his eyes," it was rather anxiety than hilarity.

A neatly dressed negro, long past the prime of life, advanced, hat in hand, to take his horse as the young man alighted; but there was no such alacrity of movement, none of the broad smiles and display of ivory, none of the humble yet hearty welcome such as the old family servants knew so well how to show a thoroughly welcome guest. Uncle Peter could not help being polite, after a frosty way, but he could not play the hypocrite and pretend to rejoice at the coming of one whom he considered among the "poor white trash," and a particularly poor specimen at that. Uncle Peter had heard about that caning affair.

"Your mistress at home, of course?" half-asked Cramp, glancing toward the open window where he caught a brief glimpse of feminine drapery. "Look after the brute carefully, will you? I've ridden him hard and fast. And maybe it would be as well for you—"

"Yes, marse, 'deed I dess will," muttered Un-

cle Peter, moving rapidly away without waiting for the end of the sentence or to answer any of the questions. "Ketch me!" he added with a lofty sniff. "Rid hard, hub? Done buckled hisself fas' in de saddle, den, fear he bre'k he triffin', no-count neck! De mist'ess—umph? De ole mist'ess he need, I reck'n; an' dat's des what he gwine fo' ketch, suah!"

Uncle Peter was a bit of a prophet in his way, for when Rufus Cramp was ushered into the drawing-room, he found himself frigidly received by Mistress Honor Magill, instead of her fair young charge, the real mistress of Fairview.

There had never been any love lost between these two, even before that disgraceful affair filled the papers and furnished a nine-days' topic for the gossips. Since then, Mistress Magill took even less trouble than ever to veil her cordial dislike.

While uttering the usual compliments, Rufus glanced quickly around the room, his brows contracting a little as he saw that Aunt Honor alone remained to receive him. Yet he was almost positive that the figure of which he had caught a glimpse when dismounting, was that of Portia Wellspring.

"Miss Portia? She is in her usual good health?"

Aunt Honor remained standing, plainly resolved to render this unwelcome guest as uncomfortable as possible, gave a stiff little bow at this nervous venture.

"She is at home? I can see her? Will you kindly request her to grant me a few moments?"

Man of the world though he prided himself on being, Rufus Cramp always found himself peculiarly uncomfortable in the presence of this frigid, uncompromising guardian angel. Even when he was a welcome guest at the villa, before that luckless affair in town, that chilly sensation always crept over him when he felt those keen gray eyes upon him.

Even now, when feeling that he held all the trumps in the bold game he had decided to play, Rufus felt strangely embarrassed and hardly knew what he stammered out at first.

"Miss Wellspring is not prepared to receive company," stiffly uttered the guardian angel, her thin hands folded primly before her, her gray eyes gazing straight over the head of the young man, her voice cold and measured. "Miss Wellspring requests me to convey her regrets that circumstances render it impossible for her to receive any one this evening."

Rufus flushed hotly, for he could not mistake this reception. It was the first time he had ventured to call at Fairview since that affair with the Duke of Derringers, and if the ghost of a hope of winning Portia Wellspring by fair means had survived, it now died the death.

At the same time, this lofty scorn served him a good turn. It banished all embarrassment, cleared his brain, and left him free to carry out his thoroughly-studied plans. If he failed now, it would not be from softness of heart.

"Then she has—who could have been so indiscreet, so cruel!" he ejaculated, his face paling and his brows contracting. "Who sent the message?"

Aunt Honor drew her tall form up still more rigidly.

"I do not comprehend by what right—"

"That of the messenger commissioned by her dear father to convey his last wishes, madam!" coldly interposed Cramp.

Mistress Magill for once was thoroughly startled, and showed as much in both face and voice as she faltered:

"Her father? His last—what do you mean, sir?"

Rufus Cramp gazed keenly into her face, always pale, but now blanched white as chalk, and in the next few moments he drank deep of revenge for the past. Speechless she gazed at him, her fingers working nervously, plainly longing to shake the whole truth out of him in a lump. It was little short of torture for her, and the rascal hugely enjoyed it, under his mask of grave concern.

"He was so opposed to sending a dispatch, lest the abrupt shock prove too severe for his child. He bade me first break the news to you, knowing that you were tougher and—"

"What do you mean, sir?" sharply gasped Aunt Honor, even in her agitation taking offense at that term. "What news? What has happened?"

"Is it possible that you are still in ignorance, then? That Miss Wellspring does not yet know—"

"What?"

Sharp, cold, unmistakable came the word, and Rufus knew that to delay longer might prove disastrous to himself and hopes.

"That her father has been taken suddenly, seriously ill at St. Louis," he uttered in a guarded tone.

A quick, sharp spasm contorted Aunt Honor's face, and one trembling hand flew up to her brow, pressing it so tightly that when, a moment later, it fell to her side, the impress of her long fingers were distinctly visible in red. Brief as the spasm was, it cast a flood of light over the brain of the young man.

"The old rack-o'-bones is in love with the father!" flashed through his mind, and just

the ghost of a smile marked the corners of his mouth for a single instant.

To conceal this, he turned abruptly away and dropped into a chair. When his eyes lifted once more, Aunt Honor was seated opposite him, her lace-mittened hands clasped in her lap, her face cold and composed, her attitude prim as ever, all emotion banished.

"This illness must have been very sudden, sir," she said. "When was Mr. Wellspring first taken down?"

Rufus mentioned the date. Aunt Honor contracted her brows.

"Two days after the date of his last letter. It may be true!"

"True?" echoed Cramp, in unfeigned astonishment. "Would I take the trouble to bring word if it was not true?"

"I did not say so, sir," was the cold retort. "I was only surprised that Mr. Wellspring, always the soul of business, sent a young man instead of his lawyer. Or, sending, he omitted intrusting you with a message other than verbal."

Rufus Cramp smiled outright at the labored speech, at the same time drawing a note-book from an inner pocket and extracting therefrom a folded slip of paper which he extended to the suspicious lady.

"As you say, I am young and but a poor man of business where my sympathy is so powerfully excited. I really forgot this paper."

Though Aunt Honor's face was cold and hard as ever, her thin fingers visibly trembled as she unfolded the paper and glanced over the brief words written therein. The name of Romulus Wellspring was attached to the lines, weak and tremulous in formation, but still clearly his handwriting.

"MY DARLING:—Come to me at once, if you would see me alive! I am very ill, but I will hold out until you can come. Trust the bearer, Rufus Cramp, and start at once. R. WELLSRING."

Aunt Honor read these words, folded the note and faced Cramp, her voice as even as of old.

"I thank you for bringing this, and I beg your forgiveness for my lack of politeness a few moments since."

"If not entirely imaginary, my dear madam, believe me when I say that it passed wholly unnoticed," bowed Rufus. "I only regret the sad cause that led to my hurried call."

"Tell me about it, please. I must know all, in order to break the terrible tidings to my poor child."

She paused abruptly, giving signs of breaking down as she spoke of Portia.

Briefly, clearly, truthfully, as far as concerned Romulus Wellspring himself, Rufus Cramp told his story up to the hour when he steamed away from St. Louis on the Mississippi Belle.

"He was still living at that hour, though the physicians had given up all hopes of his recovery. Father promised to send me a dispatch that would reach me *en route*, if the worst came. I heard nothing from him, nor was there any message awaiting me in Orleans. Consequently I hope Mr. Wellspring is still alive."

"You will kindly wait here, while I break the sad news to Miss Wellspring?" asked Aunt Honor, rising from her seat. "It is a sad duty. It will nearly kill the poor child! But there is hope—there *must* be a little hope remaining!"

She turned quickly away, her voice breaking, tears in her gray eyes that told of more acute agony than the wildest sobs and ravings from ordinary lips. And yet, as she left the room, Rufus Cramp laughed malignantly in his white handkerchief. If not utterly heartless, it was a very callous organ that served him as such.

Nearly an hour passed, but he was not impatient. There was ample time for all purposes. He did not care to start from Fairview at too early an hour. The boat did not leave until nearly noon on the next day, according to the schedule time. If necessary, the drive could be made after daydawn on the morrow; but the work he had in hand could best be performed under the dim light of the stars alone!

At the end of that period, Aunt Honor returned to the room, supporting Portia on her strong arm. Rufus Cramp rose precipitately, for a moment flushing hotly as he remembered that luckless afternoon in the city, but Portia put out a trembling hand over which he bowed low.

"I thank you, Mr. Cramp, for—"

Sobs choked her voice, and she buried her face in the stiff front of her guardian, whose arm pressed her tightly to her breast.

"There is hope—there is time enough, I think," muttered the villain, huskily.

"Only for that faint hope, this terrible blow would crush me utterly!" she cried, rallying, facing the plotter and gazing through her tears at his face, as though she would read the whole truth there. "You are not deceiving me? There is a hope, however small, that I may yet see my darling father alive? You are keeping nothing back?"

Rufus Cramp knew that far keener eyes than Portia's were upon him, and right well did he school his features as he replied:

"I have told the very worst, Miss Portia. Had there been more time to spare, I might

have been tempted to soften the terrible shock; but there is a boat leaves for up-river in the morning, and—

"We must catch that! Quick! order the carriage, and—"

"There is time enough and to spare," Rufus hastily interposed. "The nights are pleasant, and the roads in admirable condition. You are too deeply agitated to start out without a little time for composing yourself, and—"

"At once! How can I wait and father dying? Oh, Aunt Honor, do see that not a moment is lost! It is worse than death to even think of waiting, and he—"

"There is much you can do to help kill the time, better here than in town or on board the boat. Once aboard, each moment would seem an hour to your natural impatience. You can see this," to Aunt Honor, who nodded prompt assent.

"Portia!" she murmured, her lips close to the white brow as the beautiful face again hid itself in her bosom, "you shall wait not an instant longer than is absolutely necessary. There is no saying how long we will have to stop at St. Louis before your father is sufficiently recovered to travel home with us, and we must go prepared. We will have enough to do in nursing him back to health and strength, without working for ourselves, and we can't do entirely without clothes!"

"Oh! what matter?" sobbed the poor girl. "what matter about ourselves while he—my poor father!"

"You know how particular he is, Portia," softly added Aunt Honor, in the same low, soothing tones, so different from her usual ones that despite his almost breathless interest, Rufus Cramp could not keep from staring at her in amazement. "You know how he likes to see you dressed when with him. And now that he is ill—and when people are getting better, they are more particular than ever, you know, dearie. He will notice any change, any lack, while the dresses in which he has seen you before will make the room feel much more like home."

Much more Aunt Honor said in that low, tender tone, the tears filling her own eyes, usually so hard and bright, and when she slowly led the afflicted girl out of the room, Rufus Cramp settled back in his seat with an audible sigh of intense relief. The battle was won. He could choose his own hour for starting, so as to give his hired tools the most favorable opening for their dastardly work.

Shortly after, Aunt Honor returned to the room alone.

"I have induced her to take a soothing draught and lie down for a few minutes, while I prepare for the journey," she said, in her ordinary cold, precise tones. "I come to ascertain just how much rest we can allow her. At what hour does the boat start?"

"Nine o'clock, I believe."

"We would have to start long before day to reach it, then," she said, thoughtfully. "Even if we started at once, part of the trip would have to be made in the dark."

"And that being the case, if I might advise, I would say to leave here at sunset or thereabouts," quickly suggested Rufus. "That will give Miss Wellspring two or three hours' rest, and enable her to bear up against this dreadful shock all the better. The nights are pleasant and the roads good. I am a good driver, and—"

"Uncle Peter can drive."

"Of course, if you insist, but I thought Miss Wellspring would prefer being alone with you inside."

Aunt Honor opened her thin lips, but closed them again without uttering the speech that rose in her throat. This young man was certainly very fastidious, if he could not sit on the box with a negro driver, as neat and civil as Uncle Peter, but they were already under great obligations to him, and she could not say as much. And certainly they would both prefer having him on the outside during that long and sad drive.

"As you wish, Mr. Cramp," she said, quietly. "Mr. Wellspring bade us trust in you, and his word is law. We will start at the hour you prefer, and be guided by you in all things."

"I will do my best to prove worthy the trust," said Rufus, rising and bowing over the reluctant hand, the more surely to hide the fierce triumph that he could feel was blazing in his eyes.

"Then I must beg you to excuse me until it is time to start," she said, also rising to her feet. "I must keep watch over Miss Wellspring, and have a few essentials packed. We can take a trunk?"

"As many as you like," was the prompt response. "There will be no haste in driving to town, for time will pass more easily to Miss Wellspring on the road than while waiting aboard the boat."

"One trunk will be sufficient, or two, at the most. Shall I send you in some refreshment?"

"Not at present. Of course a bite or two will be beneficial to us all before starting, but just now I will go and see Uncle Peter about preparing the coach and horses."

"If you care to take the trouble, though a word from me would be all that is necessary."

"And that word I may have to crave," with a low, brief laugh, suddenly cut short, however. "Uncle Peter is terribly jealous, and will hardly yield his place as coachman to me, unless he has orders direct from his mistress."

"I will attend to that. A word will be sufficient."

Aunt Honor attended Rufus to the door, ever mindful of her position as mistress of the house in the absence of Portia, then hastened back to the sorely-afflicted daughter.

Rufus Cramp met with but an ungracious reception at the hands of Uncle Peter when he made known his wishes, and the indignant negro marched direct to the house to prefer his complaints; only to return, utterly crushed and crestfallen.

To be superseded in his proud position was a blow sufficiently heavy, he thought; but to place his beloved horses under the charge of Rufus Cramp!

"De good Lor' knows I's got 'ligion 'nough fo' 'tan' mos' any trial an' tribbylation, but dis too awful much!" he groaned, as he tenderly groomed the blood bays. "Debble tote him off on a hot shubble! Or sen' Marse Barringer wid he cane! Dat's it! Sen' him, quick!"

But Uncle Peter was permitted to pray and curse without being answered as he wished. And with hot tears of anger and shame filling his old eyes, he watched his two mistresses enter the coach, saw Rufus Cramp climb into the box—into his seat!—and touch up the bays with his whip as they started away in the gloaming. And unable to bear more, Uncle Peter shut himself up in the stables, kneeling and praying for a full hour that the foul fiend would speedily call for his just dues, in the shape of that "funnelly white trash!"

When Fairview was no longer visible, with his long coveted prize safe in the coach behind him, and the gloom of early evening sufficient to hide his smiles, Rufus Cramp gave full though silent expression to his triumph. He laughed and nodded his head. He even shook hands with himself, and mentally patted himself on the shoulder as the prince of plotters, the luckiest fellow in boots that night!

There could be no mistake, now. He had played his part to perfection thus far. He felt that he could depend on his tools, Shoe-string Johnny and his chosen ally. They would do their work, and then—

"Hurrah! for the Wellspring millions!" he chuckled, beneath his breath.

Moderately he drove, wishing to reach the rendezvous after midnight, since naturally the remainder of the trip would be made with much greater rapidity, but the time did not drag with him, whatever might be the case with the women inside the coach. He had an abundance to think of.

After all, this was but the first move in the intricate game he had entered upon. Of course winning this trick would assist him in taking the rest, but before the fight for five millions could be complete, there was many a bold move, many a perilous venture to make. The defeat of a single one might mean ruin, or worse!

Over and over his busy brain noted the most important points in the game. He convinced himself that, so far as keen foresight could do so, each emergency was provided for in advance. If the rest played their cards as correctly as he was doing now, success was certain!

An agreeable conclusion to arrive at, considering the fact that all of five million dollars depended on the result.

As he drew near the spot where he had located the bogus robbers, Rufus Cramp shook off his musings and cleared his brain for the tax which would shortly be put upon it. There must no suspicion linger about his part in that night's work.

Steadily he drove on, the horses now under complete subjection, the "fiery edge" having been taken off by the long drive, though they were still full of life and willingness. At any moment, now, he whispered to himself! Perhaps from yonder clump of trees! Maybe the next, as that landmark was passed without the anticipated attack.

Would it never happen? Had the scoundrels failed him, after all?

His face grew white as that of a corpse in the light of the stars as this fear again assailed him. Curses on them! Why could one not take on oneself several shares at once? Then one would not have to put such important trusts in—Ha! at last!

He saw two dark figures rise up from cover and leap into the road just ahead of the team, even before he heard the hoarse challenge:

"Draw up, cuss ye! Pull up, or chaw cold lead!"

"Out of the way, you scoundrels, or I'll drive over ye!" Rufus cried, in loud, clear tones.

"What do you mean—let go that horse!"

Neither of the bogus robbers had as yet touched the bits, but Rufus jerked sharply on the lines and flung the frightened animals back on their haunches. How could the startled women inside tell the difference?

"Bloody murder's what we mean, durn ye!"

bloody murder ef ye don't act hafe-way decent!" growled one of the fellows, catching the near horse by the bit and flourishing a huge pistol.

"But ef ye act white, none o' ye won't be hurt," hastened the second bold robber, nearest to the side of the coach. "It's only a bit of charity that we're beggin' fer; jes' a few ducats to keep the hungry wolf away from our doors. Not fer us, mind ye. Fer the sick mothers an' the starvin' childer!"

"Money is no object to us—"

"It's heaps to us, though!"

"I'll give you all I've got, only do not delay us now. We're on a journey where a moment's delay may cost a life, and—"

"It'll cost yours ef you don't hold yer bush! Down him, Dick, if he don't come to time in a holy minnit!"

"See what's inside, cully! A treasure, or the cove wouldn't cheek so hard. Hustle it out, an—"

"You devil—take that!" snarled Rufus, still in a marvelously distinct tone of voice. "Curse the pistol!—it snaps!"

From the inside came faint shrieks as of terror as the burly ruffian reached the door and stretched out his hand to turn the knob.

Both Portia and Aunt Honor had heard the shouts, recognized the words, and feared the worst. Even in their natural terror, they could not help feeling that they had a bold defender in Rufus Cramp.

If the driver's pistol snapped—which it did not, for the very good reason that he had not yet lifted the hammer—there were others more to be depended upon, and before Tom Kearney could open the door of the coach a bright blaze of fire lit up the darkness only a few paces away and a loud report rent the air, followed by a second, more like an echo than a separate report.

"Furies! I've got it, hard!" groaned Kearney, reeling back from the side of the coach and falling prone on his face.

His cry was duplicated by Shoe-string Johnny who reeled across the road and left the horses to plunge and rear unrestrained, for Rufus Cramp, all unnerved, was staring at the dark figure that came leaping toward the spot. Surely he had seen that tall, athletic figure before?

Surely he had! For the bold rescuer paused to make a grasp at the heads of the snorting bays, and the rays of starlight fell across his pale, handsome face.

"The Duke of Derringers! Curse you—take that!" snarled Cramp, as he flung up his pistol and fired point-blank at the gambler, who reeled back, flinging out his arms blindly!

And plying the lash savagely, Rufus Cramp sent the bays on at reckless speed, thinking only of fleeing from that dreaded enemy!

CHAPTER VI.

GETTING DOWN TO BFD-ROCK.

BUSIED with the snorting, plunging horses, which he really feared would break away in a mad panic that could hardly fail of injuring those who were inside the coach, Marmaduke Barringer did not detect the murderous action of Rufus Cramp in time to wholly avoid or foil it, but it is possible that his instinctive ducking of the head preserved his life, since the death-meant bullet tore its way through his clustering curls, breaking the scalp instead of penetrating the brain.

Still, the shock was a severe one, and the gentleman sport reeled blindly back with an inarticulate cry, the horses plunging past him in a convulsive effort to escape the horrors and horrors of that night adventure.

Dread for her, helped to banish that sickening sensation of blindness, and clearing his eyes with one hand while he grasped a fresh weapon with the other, Duke ran a few yards along the road, vainly trying to catch sight of the driving villain plain enough for a killing or a crippling shot. A momentary glimpse he had, not of Rufus Cramp, but of the coach; then it vanished, swallowed up by the shadows.

Instantly all his usual coolness came back to the gambler, and he halted, bending his ear to listen, taking a few moments to decide upon the proper course to pursue, knowing that it would be a saving of time in the end.

He could hear the whirring of wheels, the rapid trampling of hoofs, all the sounds of a frantic runaway team. Or—

The pent-up breath broke from his lips with a sound of relief that could not be mistaken. He caught the rapid cracking of a whip amid the other sounds, and that told him the real facts of the case.

Instead of running wild, the blood bays were under full control, and were being urged to greater speed by their driver.

"Unless he's so bad scared as to crowd a smash-up!" muttered Duke as he listened to the rapidly receding sounds. "I could quickly overhaul the rascal, but—"

Would that not be still more dangerous? If Rufus Cramp had recognized him, as his harsh exclamation went far to prove, would he not be rendered desperate by the sounds of gaining chase? Might he not prefer the chances of a general smash-up to a quiet surrender? Might it not be that, maddened by his failure in his

audacious plottings, he would even then try to accomplish his foul ends, by turning the frightened animals from the clear road into the timber, taking his chances of escaping with whole limbs and unfractured neck by a leap from the box!

"Let him go," muttered the Duke of Derringers, checking his first impulse to rush to his hidden horse and give speedy chase. "I'll know where to look for him, and there's time enough."

Possibly this decision was hastened by a sound that just then broke from a short distance to his rear: a groan of pain, accompanied by a curse, and followed by a husky sentence:

"Don't skin out an' leave me, pard!"

Without a sound to betray himself, the Duke of Derringers sunk low down amid the shadows that shrouded even the road, then crept to the edge of the shrubbery out of which the bogus footpads had leaped to play their part in that peculiar drama. He crouched there, one hand toying with a derringer, a tigerish smile playing about his lips, a red glow filling his big eyes.

"That was Tom Kearney bleating," he mentally decided. "It may have been me he caught sight of, and if so, he'll be pretty apt to make another call or a personal break. Either way, he's my mutton!"

How accurately the gambler reasoned, the next few moments showed.

A hollow groan came from the spot where the red-headed ruffian had fallen at the first shot. Again he spoke, this time with more clearness, as though rising anger was lending him strength.

"Play white, mate! I've got it, bad, but you won't turn tail an' jump the pit without—Curse it, Johnny! Show up!"

Still there came no answer in words, but as he breathlessly listened, the Duke of Derringers felt positive that pathetic appeal had reached the ears for which it was intended.

Only a slow, faint rustling in the shrubbery almost directly beside him. A sound that might have been caused by a broken branch swaying in the wind, scraping its tip across a bunch of leaves and small twigs; only there was no breeze afloat just then.

"Johnny thinks it's a mighty unhealthy game he's caught, I reckon, and wants to draw out without taking the trouble of passing up his chips for what's left of his stake," grimly chuckled the gambler, reading that faint rustling aright.

Flattening himself close to the ground, the Duke of Derringers began crawling forward, not a sound betraying his progress, not the slightest rustle going ahead to warn the wretched Shoe-String Johnny of his impending capture.

Crippled, with his right arm dragging helplessly at his side, with the loss of blood weakening both his body and his will, the petty gambler thought only of crawling deeper into the wood, lest Tom Kearney should try to seek him out, and thus the more surely bring that terrible man upon him. For by the flash of the pistol that sent him staggering into the bushes, Shoe-string Johnny had recognized the man whom he feared above all others in the world!

The shock of the heavy ball striking and shattering the bones of his arm, just below the shoulder, quickly benumbed his senses and let his carcass drop in the cover almost like that of a dead man. All that followed, he had missed. He could not even guess how long a time had elapsed since his being wounded. He knew not that, unconsciously to himself, Duke Barringer had sought cover very close to the spot where his second victim had reeled to drop. He only knew that Tom Kearney was calling on him for help, and that the rising anger in his voice would lead him to move that way, almost surely acting as a guide to their dreadful enemy.

And in his blind terror Shoe-string Johnny saw nothing of the dark form that suddenly shot through the gloom and alighted close beside him, until it was too late to draw a weapon or make a move in self-defense. One steel-like hand closed upon his throat. Another thrust the cold muzzle of a wide-mouthed derringer against his temple. And a low, stern voice muttered in his ear:

"Give a single yelp, and off goes the roof of your house, Johnny! I reckon you know I mean business when I call the turn."

A gasp, a convulsive shiver, but nothing that could reach the keenest ears two yards away. And like one fascinated, John Mack lay staring up into those fiercely-blazing orbs.

"I spared your life a bit ago," added the Duke of Derringers, in a guarded voice, the words coming rapidly. "I could have sent my lead through your brain with less trouble, but it struck me that you might have a little information worth salting down. I've got you. I want your mate, Tom Kearney. I want him alive and able to wag his tongue. I want to see which one of you is smart enough to save his neck by telling the most truth in the shortest length of time."

"I'll tell—I won't buck against—"

The Duke of Derringers tightened his grip until the faint gasping ceased for lack of room to escape.

"I'm talking, Johnny," in that same low, but

terribly distinct tone. "Tom is calling to you and getting red-hot. I'm going to let up with my patent squeezers, so you can answer the rascal. Say what you like in reply, but if you don't play him right into my hand, you're frozen out of this game for good and all. You understand, Johnny?"

Mack said yes with his eyes, and the Duke of Derringers added:

"The game's made, Johnny, and you can run off the papers. But don't forget that I'm holding the cue-box and marking up on the strict square. Slip a double, and bu'st goes your bank forever!"

Seeing how frightened the petty gambler was, Duke Barringer couched his warning in the terms which he felt would make the deepest impression on the wounded wretch; nor was he mistaken.

With a faint catching of breath, a little moistening of his lips, Shoe-string Johnny muttered faintly:

"You want me to tole him here? I'll do all you ask, sir."

"Yes. He's an ugly brute, and I might have to kill him if he suspected what was up. I'd rather see him hung."

Shoe-string Johnny shivered anew at those cold words, but turning his head toward the road, from whence Kearney had called, he uttered in a guarded but clear tone:

"Is that you, mate?"

"Is it me?" snarled the red-haired ruffian, with a hollow groan, mingling with sundry savage oaths of angry pain. "Took you mighty long to find your voice! Help me, can't you?"

"If I only could!" groaned Johnny, in an agonized tone that not the heartiest wish to please could have counterfeited. "My arm's gone! I'm bleeding to death—and I can't even help myself!"

A snarling curse from Kearney then:

"You've got it too, eh? Who was it? That infernal Cramp?"

Shoe-string Johnny glanced up at the face of his master. A sharp nod gave him the required clew, and he groaned out feebly:

"Yes—Rufus Cramp! A put-up job, I reckon, but—Tom—I'm going! Oh, help—help me, pard!"

Far better than the Duke of Derringers could expect, Shoe-string Johnny was playing his part, and such eloquent agony did he put into his appeal, that for the moment Tom Kearney seemed to forget his own injuries.

Barringer heard his exclamation, and knew that the red-headed ruffian was coming to his mate in misfortune. He crept hastily forward a few paces, and prepared for work.

True to his pledge, Shoe-string Johnny gave a hollow groan as an additional guide, and thus decoyed his fellow criminal directly into the snare.

Suddenly leaping up and forward, Barringer grappled with the astounded ruffian, throwing him heavily to the ground, pinning his one sound arm with his knee, pressing a derringer against his temple as he sternly menaced:

"Cave, Tommy, or away goes your last stake! The cards are put up, and I can make you win or lose, just as I please. Which shall it be?"

There was no reply, for ample reasons. In falling Kearney had struck his head against a solid snag, depriving him of his senses for a brief space. And recognizing this fact, Duke Barringer deftly secured his hands behind him with a strong silk handkerchief, completing the job just as the rascal recovered consciousness sufficiently to begin a feeble struggle.

"It's no use, my gentle lamb," laughed the Duke of Derringers, as Kearney ceased with a groan of agony, the effort wrenching his injured arm. "I've got you foul, and so I mean to keep you until—"

"Johnny Mack! he sold me out!" panted the prisoner, with deadly hatred filling his tones.

"And himself in the same lot," laughed Barringer, instantly resolved what course to follow. "The price he got will never make him too rich for sound sleeping. Your turn now, Johnny!"

He sprang to the side of the gambler, grasping him with seeming roughness, turning him over and proceeding to bind his hands behind his back, but under cover of this contriving to softly breathe:

"Don't give yourself away, and I'll fill his eyes with sand!"

If Johnny understood his meaning, he gave no sign beyond a faint groan of agony. The Duke of Derringers laughed shortly, hardly.

"Bah! you howl as though the whole roof of your house was blown away! Better for you both if you had ground your teeth and smothered yourself with your groans. That would only have been death; now, you've got me to deal with!"

"Spare me—spare us!" moaned Johnny, no longer counterfeiting, his old dread returning with redoubled force. "I'll blow the gaff—I'll tell you the whole story, if you'll only agree to—"

A short, chilling laugh cut his trembling speech short.

"I believe I'm the one to mention conditions, Johnny, and you two precious scoundrels the ones to accept what I offer, thankful for even

the smallest of favors. What do you think, my fine fellow?" turning abruptly toward Tom Kearney, scanning his bloated face as keenly as the uncertain light would permit.

He saw enough to satisfy himself that he had thrown Kearney off the track, and to banish his first hot suspicions. With a surly growl, the ruffian muttered:

"It's your lead, boss. But ef Johnny hed a grain of sand left, we could make half-way decent terms with you, or I'm mightily out in my reckoning. Curse a cocktail, I say!"

A sound from Shoe-string Johnny, half a groan, half an angry snarl, warned Barringer that after all he might overreach himself in thus beating about the bush. It was true, he knew considerable, thanks to his lucky eaves-dropping of that forenoon, but there was much hidden behind a veil which even his keenness could not penetrate unassisted. Perhaps he would have acted more wisely in contenting himself with capturing Shoe-string Johnny, and trusting to his confession alone.

It was too late to think of that, now, and dropping his half-bantering tone, he spoke sternly:

"It is my lead, and the more carefully you both follow it, the better for you when all's done. Get up, and take a little walk!"

As he spoke, Barringer stooped and lifted John Mack to his feet. Tom Kearney managed to assume a perpendicular unassisted.

"Follow your noses, and keep going until I call a halt," added Barringer, indicating a direction at right angles with the road.

Unable to resist, the two crippled wretches complied, staggering through the undergrowth as best they could in their weakened condition, and only halting when they reached a little opening, safely beyond ear-shot of the highway.

"I'm going to treat you as white as you'll permit me, boys," said the Duke of Derringers, separating them a few paces, and deftly relieving them one after the other of their weapons, tossing the tools far away in the darkness which surrounded them. "First, I'll tie up those hurts of yours, to keep you from cheating the hangman by bleeding to death; but I do it only on conditions, which you'll please weigh in your minds while I'm playing surgeon. Tell me all I want to know, and you can take your chances of getting safe to town and in hiding until this ugly little scrape blows over."

"It was only a bit of a spree, anyhow," muttered Johnny. "We was drunk, or we wouldn't—"

"This, if you talk straight," coldly interposed the Duke of Derringers. "If you tip me any lies—as you tried to do, just now, gentle Johnny!—I'll tear off your bandages and let you shift for yourselves, until I can gallop to town and put the hounds on your scent. The lay-out is before you, lads; study it over and place your bets according to your own judgment."

With steady, practiced hands, the Duke of Derringers set to work. He cut the shirt from John Mack's back, and tore it into bandages. He cut splinters to hold Johnny's shattered arm firmly, bandaging it snugly. He gave Tom Kearney equal attention, and having placed the injured arms in comfortable slings, he got down to sober business.

"Now, Johnny, your tongue is the limberest. What were you two rascals trying to work over yonder, anyhow?"

"You won't believe us if we do tell the plain truth," was the sullen response.

"Try me with a little of it, and see," was the quiet retort.

Johnny hesitated. He had been thinking steadily while Barringer was at work upon their wounds. The gentleman sport had shown him so much greater consideration than he had expected, that he could not help thinking he might keep his real object secret, and yet escape easily. If he made a clean breast of it, farewell to all his bright dreams of a long succession of "stakes" from Rufus Cramp.

It was risky, he admitted to himself, but was it not worth trying for? After all, if detected in a lie, The Duke might not be so hard on him, a crippled wretch.

"We were flat broke, and not a show for a stake. We'd been drinking, too, a little too much for level heads, and so it looked like a good joke to try the road for a flyer. It was all bluff, though, I'll swear! We didn't mean to hurt anybody, and we was just sheering off when you let drive at us. Ask Tom if I ain't giving it to you straight, now!"

"I don't want to make Tom soil his soul with perjury, Johnny," the Duke of Derringers said, with a cold smile that was more dangerous than the blackest of frowns. "When did you first think of this old way to pay recent debts, Johnny?"

"Last night—this morning," faltered Mack, shrinking from that handsome face with his old shiver of dread.

"This forenoon, about ten o'clock? Not so far wrong, Johnny. Of course, you were not drunk enough to do your talking in a saloon! You had sense sufficient to know you would be safer in a room—at your own room, for instance. But too drunk to lower your voices enough to keep the

sounds within those four walls, Johnny; worse luck for you!"

A savage curse parted the lips of Tom Kearney. A hollow groan of despair broke from his shivering comrade, for neither of them could longer doubt the truth.

The Duke of Derringers laughed shortly, but there was little mirth in his tones or in his face as he added:

"When a man puts his mind to it, he can crowd his body into a precious small compass, Johnny, and the transom over the door was too high up for you to see all the way under the bed."

"I knew it! I felt that you were watching and listening all the time!" muttered Mack, cold drops standing out on his face, an ague fit shaking his person, his face ghastly pale.

"So I heard you say, and gave you credit for much more instinct than sense or wit," laughed Duke, mockingly.

"If you heard that you must have heard more!" desperately cried the cornered gambler. "You must have heard me say that I would make a clean breast to you if—"

"That 'if' carried the day, Johnny," was the pitiless interruption. "It didn't keep you from hiring Tom Kearney to aid you in laying the little ambush out yonder. It didn't keep you from doing your level best to carry out the orders Rufus Cramp gave you. And if I hadn't chanced upon you in the nick of time, it wouldn't have hindered you from—which one of the ladies were you to kill?" he abruptly interjected, bending forward and gazing intently into that white, terror-stricken face.

"Neither one," hastily interposed Kearney, only to reel back under a heavy back-handed blow full on the lips.

"I'm talking to you, Johnny, and I look for your answer. I heard too much at the hotel for you to throw me off on a wrong scent. Rufus Cramp wanted a woman put out of the way. I heard the voices of two ladies in the coach. Which one were you to murder?"

"The old lady—but not kill—only make sure she couldn't get to town in time to catch the Superb in the morning for up-river," hastily spluttered the thoroughly cowed gambler.

Unconsciously to himself, the Duke of Derringers gave a gasp of intense relief. He had anticipated far worse than this. At the very best, he believed these two rascals were hired to carry Portia off to some obscure retreat where she would be wholly at the mercy of Rufus Cramp, and where a forced marriage alone could release her.

There was something in the manner of Shoe-string Johnny that told him the truth had been spoken at last, and his manner became milder.

"What was his object in that?" he asked. "Go on and tell me every word that Rufus Cramp uttered as nearly as you can recall them. Don't try to cram me, Johnny, or you'll be the worst sufferer. Remember, you did some mighty loose and reckless talking up in your room."

The victory was won, and Shoe-string Johnny made no further attempt to hide the truth. Yet his explanation was far from satisfying the gentleman sport. There was still a cloud of mystery hanging over the affair which he could not penetrate, try as he might.

As he had told Murtogh Murphy, Rufus Cramp told John Mack that Romulus Wellspring had died at St. Louis, and that he was commissioned to escort Portia to that city by the first boat. He said that he had his reasons for not wishing Honor Magill to bear them company on the trip, and was willing to pay a heavy sum if she could be made to miss that particular boat. He had not mentioned murder or killing, though it might be inferred from his words that he would not grieve should her accident prove serious enough to lay her up in lavender for some time.

"He was to show fight, but we wasn't to mind that. We was to haul out the women, and as though hot at not making a better pull, were to carelessly sling the old girl too far away for her to get back in time to catch the carriage. The horses were to run away, you know, with the young lady inside and Cramp on the box," concluded Mack.

Barringer stood for a time in deep thought, trying to pierce the mystery, but vainly. Rufus Cramp must ardently desire the absence of Mistress Magill, to run such risk; but what was he to gain by it? Always that question, and ever the same answer: time alone could tell!

With an effort, the Duke of Derringers cast off this spell, saying:

"I'll give you a last chance, Johnny, and you'd best make all you can out of it. Have you told me everything about this affair?"

"Everything—I'll take my oath!" eagerly cried the gambler.

"I'd just as quick take your bare word, Johnny," with a dubious smile. "All right! Time will tell, and if it tells against you, make your will in a hurry, for I'll call the turn on you, for a dead certainty, Johnny!"

"And now, you can take your own way. Better pick up your horses and make for town, to have those arms looked after by a regular medicine sharp. I won't give you away, unless I have to."

The Duke of Derringers turned on his heel and strode swiftly off to the spot where he had hidden his good horse while waiting for the proper moment to put in an appearance on the stage. A low, grateful whinny greeted him, but for once the master failed to respond after the expected fashion. Freeing the animal, he leaped into the saddle and rode briskly along the road toward the city.

There was no particular hurry, so far as time alone was concerned. Before leaving town he had ascertained the hour at which the Superb was to pull out for up-river, and it yet lacked a full hour to dawn. His only anxiety was as to the possible moves of Rufus Cramp.

Beyond the possibility of a doubt, he was playing a bold game, in hopes of winning at least a portion of the Wellspring millions. But how could he expect this? What were his intentions concerning Portia? Did he hope to hide her away in town, until he could frighten her into marrying him? Was this why he wanted to get rid of Honor Magill?

Was there any truth in the story he had spread concerning Romulus Wellspring? Was the millionaire really dead? If so, it was strange the tidings had not spread all over town, where he was so well known, where his interests were so enormous, where his death would create such a sensation in business circles, for a time at least.

And yet—would he dare spread such a report without having a foundation of truth? How else could he have prevailed on Miss Wellspring and her guardian to accompany him at such an hour, on such short notice?

Truly, the Duke of Derringers had ample food for thought to last him for a much longer ride than was then before him, and it is hardly to be wondered at that the city was reached almost before he was conscious of the fact; certainly before he had unraveled the enigma.

He was aroused by the abrupt shying of his horse, and looked up to recognize Martin Tullar, then chief of police, barring the way.

"Good-morning, Duke," briskly uttered that official, advancing and grasping with his left hand that was extended mechanically by the startled gambler. "Though I can't exactly say I'm glad to see you!"

"Yet you look sober enough, old man," laughed the sport, though with a puzzled air, for there was something peculiar about the chief.

"Would you rather I laughed?" a little brusquely retorted the officer, his grip tightening quickly. "I hate to do it, Duke, but business is business, and I want you!" he added rapidly, and Barringer could see that there was a revolver ready in the speaker's right hand.

CHAPTER VII.

PLAYING AGAINST TIME.

SAVAGELY as he would have chafed against any interference, just as his cunningly-baited trap was being sprung, Rufus Cramp was doubly furious when he recognized the pale, handsome face of the Duke of Derringers starting up before him so unexpectedly.

He heard the pistol-shots, and saw his hired tools stagger away as though slain or crippled. He knew he could look for no assistance at their hands, else, in his desperation, he would have fought to carry out his scheme even then. Single-handed he dared not attempt it, if only because he might thus betray his real self to the women in his charge.

He saw Marmaduke Barringer grasping at the heads of the frightened horses, and knowing how unfit he was just then to meet the gentleman sport on a common footing where questions would be asked and must be answered, he fired the shot that so narrowly missed making him an actual murderer.

He saw the Duke of Derringers reel back with up-tossed arms as the terrified horses plunged forward, and a thrill of savage exultation shot through his veins as he felt that he had at last avenged his old-time disgrace. Only for an instant, however. He glanced over his shoulder to see the gentleman sport still upon his feet, alive, seemingly unharmed!

In that moment all the olden fear came rushing back, and instead of trying to check the flight of the snorting animals, he plied the lash with vicious energy, only striving to keep them in the beaten track and the swaying coach from overturning.

Almost every second he cast a glance of terror and apprehension over his shoulder, expecting to see the Duke of Derringers in swift pursuit, to rescue the ladies, if not to avenge the dastardly attempt upon his own life.

He was too thoroughly demoralized to stop to ask himself how the gambler could possibly know who occupied the coach. Just then it seemed a matter of course that The Duke knew all, even to the nature of the false attack, and what induced it.

But as the moments passed on, each one carrying them further from the scene of the ambushade without sight or sound of the Duke of Derringers, Rufus Cramp began to recover from the shock he had received, and to take a more reasonable view of the matter. Surely Duke

Barringer, unless slain or crippled by that hasty shot, would have overtaken them ere this, did he know or even suspect who occupied the coach?

"It was only chance that brought him there! It may not have been that demon, after all!" he mentally said, but at the same time he knew that he was trying to deceive himself in the last thought.

It was but a hasty glimpse, to be sure, but even in a far dimmer light he could not have mistaken another face for that of the man who had cased him so mercilessly.

"What of it? Suppose it was him? Even if he comes to kick up a row, what can he prove? We were attacked by footpads, and threatened with death. I can prove that by the women, and—ha! why not?"

Rufus Cramp was only seeking what might excuse his shot at the Duke of Derringers, but he found more. It was audacious—even with his brain so intensely excited, with his every fiber thrilling until each nerve seemed like a tensely strung wire, the thought startled and almost awed him.

"Charge him with being chief of the gang! Swear that you shot all three down in defense of the women!"

It was audacious, but better attack than either retreat or remain on the defensive. It was a card that might count either or both ways. If that shot had killed The Duke of Derringers, his memory would be blackened and disgraced. If only wounded, which would help to confirm the charge, it would give him enough to explain without leaving time for meddlesome work. And just now an hour lost or won, might make all the difference between complete success or disastrous defeat in this desperate Fight for Five Millions!

From that instant Rufus Cramp was decided in his course of action, and the magnitude of his stakes lent him a nerve and clearness of wit such as he had never held at command at any former period.

No longer urging the jaded horses on with frantic energy, but using the soothing arts of a really skillful driver, he quickly brought them down to a trot, a walk, and then entirely checked them. Mindful even of the minutest point, he took care to turn their heads close to a couple of stout trees before alighting, so that a sudden start would be impossible, then alighted with many a soothing word, gripping the reins with ostentatious care as he opened the door and pantingly asked after the ladies' welfare.

Aunt Honor was almost as much composed as usual, and answered him promptly. Shaken a little by the runaway, frightened a little by the outrageous assault, but really none the worse for the adventure.

"It is a burning disgrace that such abominable outrages are possible!" Aunt Honor declared, with frigid indignation. "What do we pay our police for? Highway robbers at this day! Abominable!"

"If it was no worse than—"

Rufus Cramp spoke impulsively, but cut himself short. It was neatly performed, especially the quick look which he cast toward the young lady, whose grief rendered her almost apathetic.

"What do you mean, sir? What am I to infer?" quickly demanded Aunt Honor, leaning forward until she nearly filled up the doorway.

"That this was more than a common theft," hurriedly whispered Cramp. "To save time and trouble, I was willing to give the rascals my purse, but—"

"I heard you tell them as much. Go on," briefly said Aunt Honor as the cunning villain hesitated, glancing doubtfully over her shoulder as though dreading to say all with Portia for a listener.

"I only saw two men at first, and they were common ruffians, but when a third came forward—when I recognized his face—then I knew more than simple robbery was intended, and I used my pistols the best I could. I marked the scoundrel, if nothing more!"

"I marked the faces of two—"

"Was one tall, with heavy beard, and the outward appearance of a gentleman?" eagerly asked Rufus Cramp, hardly daring to entertain the hope that so suddenly flashed across his mind.

"Both had beards. The first one was coarse and rough, the other, whose face I saw as the horses started to run away, might have passed for a gentleman, perhaps, under other circumstances."

"Could you swear to that face? Could you give anything like a definite description of the face, dress or person?"

"I can and will, if necessary. But what do you suspect?"

Rufus Cramp bent forward until his lips almost touched her ear.

"That man was a gambler, Marmaduke Barringer. He was chief of the trio. I heard him bid his fellows make sure of the girl—I can swear to those very words—before I began shooting! You can draw your own inference, madam."

"The graceless villain!" gasped Aunt Honor, taken aback by the terrible hint thus conveyed. "I'll prosecute him off the face of the earth!—to dare—"

"To guard her, we must lay information against him and his lawless allies," hurriedly

added Cramp. "The quicker we reach town and set the police on his track, the better our chances of success. Try and recall his face and figure as perfectly as possible, while we are getting there. Don't alarm her, if you can avoid it."

With this parting whisper—which, with all that had gone before it, seemed wholly unnoticed by Portia Wellspring in her stupefying grief—Rufus Cramp, thoroughly satisfied with his success thus far, climbed into the box and sent the horses briskly toward the city.

Day had not yet fairly dawned when they entered the city, for the cunning schemer had feared to waste time along the way, difficult as he felt it would be to pass away the hours which must intervene before the Superb started on her trip up-river. He knew that if Marmaduke Barringer even suspected who occupied that coach he would lose no time in following if an atom of life remained in his body. It would be much easier to dispose of him if he could be branded before reaching town.

All too short Rufus Cramp found the drive, eager as he was to put the hounds of justice on the track of his dangerous adversary. Not only had he to lay his plans for that, but he must concoct another scheme for "dropping" Aunt Honor, which would be an even more difficult task, he began to fear.

Yet, although he had not perfectly arranged his programme, Rufus Cramp showed no hesitation as they entered the city, driving briskly along until he drew rein before the livery-stable of Murtogh Murphy, the rattle of wheels and clatter of hoofs bringing that wakeful worthy to the door.

Business was business with the Emerald, and certainly there were no signs of the disgust on his honest face as he came forward, doffing his hat with an inquisitive glance at the closed window. If not exactly a "raal gintleman," Rufus Cramp had money and paid liberally.

"It's safe back I'm glad to see yer hanner, an' it's a wee taste toired the bastes lue, to be sure, sor! W'u'd it be a bite an' a wishp follyin' a nate rubbin' down fer the p'rtly pets, now, ye'd be wantin', Mistor Cramp?" he volubly uttered, rubbing the tip of his shining red nose with the brim of his hat, which he held before him with both hands after a half-bashful, half-obsequious fashion.

"Not just at present, my good fellow, though the cattle will be left in your charge for a few days, probably," was the hurried reply.

"It's the proud mon Murtogh Murphy'll be for that same thrust, sor, an' though he says so himsilf, which w'u'd better become other lips, sor, it's not the harses that'll complain o' the keepin'."

"As I know, else I wouldn't trust them in your care. They belong to Mr. Wellspring, and his coachman will call for them. But, now—can you lend me a trusty hand for a few minutes?"

"Maybe it's mesilf w'u'd sarve the purpose, yer hanner."

"As well as another," shortly uttered Cramp, moving along on the seat to make room, fearing he was losing too much time in talk. "Jump up, and lively!"

Murphy was beside him in an instant, taking the proffered lines and whip without a word, simply looking into the face of his employer for instructions.

Rufus Cramp gave them quickly, though not until the noise of the starting hoofs helped to deaden his voice so that it could not possibly reach even the keen ears belonging to Aunt Honor.

"Drive at once to Chief Tullar's office. It's early, but I trust we'll find him there."

"Av it's on business, ye will, sor," promptly returned Murphy, with a true Irishman's faith in another of the same nationality. "Sure he sleeps there, does Martin, he token he's a bachelor, widout wife or childher to kape him awake. Sure to foind him, yer hanner! It isn't Murtogh Murphy w'u'd be so oumannerly as to ax what moight be the reason av sich an airly call."

An Irish hint, but Rufus Cramp declined to accept it.

"I may be detained some little time, if the chief is in."

"Sure, sor, it's me that niver kapes count o' the hours whin waitin' for a gintleman loike yer hanner," bowed Murphy. "Sure an' I'd be contint to wait tin year widout wan glimse av yer handsome face in the lave of it all, so I w'u'd now!"

Sober as a judge was that side of Murphy's face toward Cramp, but his off eye gave a most diabolical wink for his own benefit, that told plainly enough just what the last sentence meant beneath its surface.

"You remember what I told you about Mr. Wellspring?"

"Heaven rest his sowl!" piously muttered Murphy, crossing himself with the tip of oue thumb.

"His daughter is inside, with her relative, Mrs. Magill. They are going with me to St. Louis, on the Superb. It was a terrible shock for the poor young lady, and she is still suffer-

ing from the effects. Time was so short I couldn't soften the blow in any way."

"It must have made the tinder heart av ye weep tares av blood to shpake the worruds, sor!" demurely uttered Mr. Murphy, his off cheek sticking out with a mocking thrust of his tongue tip.

"It was a disagreeable duty, but one which was forced upon me by Mr. Wellspring himself. I could not decline it. I have done the best I knew how, and however the matter turns out, I cannot be blamed."

"Say praised, yer hanner," equivocated Murphy.

"Let that pass," more rapidly uttered Cramp, seeing that they were drawing near the chief's office. "The young lady is so shaken that she will be better off on board the steamer. Our business will detain us for an hour or more, but you can drive her direct to the Superb. Here are the tickets, and you can attend to the baggage behind. Of course this all goes into your bill."

"Niver mintion it, sor!" cheerfully cried the man, with a deprecatory shake of the red head. "Waitin' an a swate leddy loike yan', is pay too big for the loikes av Murtogh Murphy, I'avin' out the dirty money—beggin' its pardon for the crooked worrud!"

With a flourish he drew up before the office where Chief of Police Martin Tullar reigned, and Rufus Cramp leaped to the sidewalk. He hastened to open the door, whispering as Aunt Honor almost thrust her face against his in the effort to distinguish where they were, in the gloom of early dawn:

"This is the place where we must lay our complaint. Do not disturb Miss Wellspring. Your evidence is all that is needed, added to what I can tell."

Without a word, Aunt Honor stepped briskly outside, and closing the door, Rufus Cramp motioned for Murphy to drive on. He started at once, in a brisk trot, greatly to Aunt Honor's surprise and indignation.

"It's all right, my dear madam," hastily uttered Cramp, catching her by the arm and checking the shrill summons which was on the point of being hurled after the unsuspecting Murphy. "We may be detained an hour or more, and so I thought it best for Miss Wellspring to secure a little rest and quiet. Murphy has my orders to drive her to a quiet boarding-house, just a little ways around the corner."

"You said nothing to me," wrathfully breathed Aunt Honor, as the coach whirled swiftly around the corner. "The poor child will be dreadfully surprised. I didn't tell her—how could I?"

"I beg your pardon, madam," and the schemer bowed meekly before the indignant lady. "I've had so much to think of—I've lost so much sleep of late, hurrying to carry this lamentable news to you—that I really forgot that you did not fully understand. But Murphy is thoroughly trustworthy—as the chief will tell you—and Miss Wellspring will suffer no great alarm. And—I think the quickest way to rejoin her will be for us to see the chief at once," he added, gently drawing Aunt Honor toward the office door.

Before she could reply, or refuse, the door opened and the chief himself bade them enter. A little awed in his presence, as those are almost sure to be who have never had dealings with the representatives of justice in person, Mrs. Magill accepted the chair offered by the polite chief, and Rufus Cramp began his artful story.

With growing interest Chief Tullar listened, for he was a true bloodhound who would arrest an own brother as quick as an utter stranger, or one who loved his power, through cruelty. Not even his worst enemy could accuse Martin Tullar of anything like that. But he was a born detective and policeman, with a nose for crime and criminals sure as that of a terrier for vermin. If a man sinned in these times, he did so with his eyes fully open to the consequences. If he sinned, and was caught, he must naturally expect to suffer. Policemen were appointed to protect society and to arrest sinners. As they were sworn to perform their duty, even so they must keep that oath sacred.

This, in a nutshell, was Martin Tullar's creed.

Tersely, but clearly, Rufus Cramp told the story of the attempted highway robbery from his selected standpoint, only stopping short of naming the Duke of Derringers. Then he fell back a little, to give way to Aunt Honor.

She was little more prolix, simply stating what she had heard and seen. She first described the face and figure of Tom Kearney as seen through the glass portion of the door, and dim as was the light where the robbery had taken place, Rufus Cramp paled a little as he saw how closely Aunt Honor had observed. And Chief Tullar bowed, with a grim smile on his broad, massive face.

"I know the fellow. Beg pardon, ma'am. Please continue."

The grim smile faded from his face as Aunt Honor proceeded to describe with equal closeness the second face she had mentally noted. It was the schemer's turn to smile, but he did so inwardly. He knew that Chief Tullar must re-

member that caning affair, and being on fairly intimate terms with the Duke of Derringers, would naturally receive his unsupported testimony with no little caution.

"You must have seen this—the person the lady describes so minutely," said the chief, gravely, turning toward Rufus Cramp.

"I did see him, plainly," was the calm reply. "I did more; I put a mark on his head that he cannot conceal for a few days."

"You had a row with him, then?" smiling a little, as though his memory reverted to another occasion when "a row" took place.

"I shot at him, even as I shot down his two allies," coldly. "He was holding my team, calling to the other rascals to make quick work."

"And you agree with the description this lady gives?"

"In every respect. I can give you the man's name, if necessary."

"And that is?"

"Marmaduke Barringer, better known, perhaps, as the Duke of Derringers," quietly responded Cramp.

"You are prepared to press this charge against Mr. Barringer, of course?" slowly asked the chief.

"Would I take the trouble to make it, else?"

"Press the charge?" echoed Aunt Honor, indignation in every tone, in every inch of her stately figure. "Indeed we will press it—the audacious villain!"

"I must take your names, then. Of course I know yours, Mr. Cramp, but the lady is—"

"A close relative of Romulus Wellspring, Esquire," coldly interposed Rufus. "The other lady is Mr. Wellspring's daughter. She would have added her complaint, but for illness brought on by painful news from her father, who—"

"I beg pardon," muttered the chief, springing to his feet, flushing before the prim lady who so frigidly gazed at him.

"There is no harm done, if you set your men promptly at work. Unless Barringer was killed—which I fear was not the case—he will undoubtedly try to enter town. You know the road by which he must come. Perhaps you may be in time to intercept him, even yet, it is so early. Or, if he does not come, you can send out along the road until you find sign; it will not be lacking, depend on it," with a hard smile.

That was before the days when witnesses were locked up in jails while those they accused of sin were permitted to walk abroad in apparent freedom, and the chief bowed his early visitors out with much more *impreusement* than he had received them.

Rufus Cramp glanced at his watch with inward anxiety. Time was passing rapidly, and each fleeting moment was growing more and more precious. He had not dared show too great haste in that interview with the chief, who might take it upon himself to hold him, at least, as a witness, if he was allowed to suspect their purpose of leaving on the Superb for St. Louis that very morning.

He must dispose of Aunt Honor now, for more than ever was he determined that she should not bear Portia Wellspring company on that trip. There was time, unless the old lady should suspect mischief too soon. She was terribly keen and far-seeing!

"There is ample time to devote a couple of hours to breakfast and repose, if you wish, dear madam," he said, cheerily as they moved away from the office, his blue eyes glancing around in search of a conveyance of some sort, as soon as a corner hid them from the office.

"Take me to Miss Wellspring, at once," briefly replied Aunt Honor.

"That is what I meant, of course," with a bow. "It is not very far, but—ah! that's lucky!" and he waved his hand as a signal to the driver of a bright, neat hack crossing in front of them.

His easy, natural air had banished any faint suspicions which had been awakened by his curious conduct in sending off the coach with Portia Wellspring, and with a little sigh of comfort, Aunt Honor sunk back on the soft cushions, unheeding if she heard the directions which Rufus Cramp hurriedly gave the driver. Neither the street nor the number mentioned would have alarmed her in the least, thanks to her ignorance of that quarter of the city, but possibly it was just as well for the schemer and his plans that she failed to catch the significant leer and wink which the driver gave on receiving his instructions.

A very few minutes sufficed to carry them to the house indicated, and when they drew up, and Aunt Honor expressed her surprise at not seeing anything of the coach, Rufus Cramp hastily uttered:

"The horses were tired, and possibly Murphy thought it best to take them around to the stable for a feed. Still, to make sure there is no mistake, I'll run up and ask after Miss Wellspring."

Without waiting for an answer, he rushed up the steps and rung the bell, plying the knocker as well. The door was opened after a short delay, and stepping on the threshold, Rufus hurriedly addressed the fat, flashily-dressed woman who smiled upon him:

"No time to talk—business! An old lady is

coming here thinking to find her charge, Miss Wellspring, who came an hour or so ago. The girl is up-stairs sleeping, tell her. Take her in, give her a cup of tea, or something to make her sleep. She mustn't disturb the lady, mind."

"Sleep for good and all?" smiled the woman, showing her teeth.

"No; but she mustn't get away before dark, at the earliest. Your own price, remember. I can trust you?"

"Certainly. That goes without saying."

Rufus Cramp turned and assisted the lady from the back, hurriedly telling her:

"Miss Wellspring is here, sleeping. She can have two hours' rest, at the least. I will return in time for you with the coach. You had better take a little rest yourself, if you can."

And all-unsuspecting the nature of the house, or of the cunning snare into which she had been lured, Aunt Honor entered the building and the triumphant schemer hurried away to catch the boat.

What glorious luck! Every obstacle overcome, even as they started up in his path, threatening him with ruin and defeat! He could hardly keep from laughing aloud, from shouting forth his wild, delirious exultation as he reached the dock and saw the Superb still there, though with steam up and apparently everything in readiness for beginning her long, weary battle with the Father of Waters.

Owing to his constant traveling up and down the river, his was a face more or less familiar to all river men, and as he entered the office, he was greeted by the clerk with some little warmth.

"Just in time, eh, Hoover?" he cried with a little laugh.

"With a couple of hours to spare," was the reply.

The bright smile faded away, and a shade of anxiety took its place.

"I thought nine o'clock was the schedule?" pulling out his watch.

"It is, but there's some delay with the mails, I believe. It will be full eleven before we pull out. The longer time to spend on board, Cramp, and you hadn't ought to complain of that, *this* trip, anyway!" the clerk added, the last sentence being a lowered and confidential one.

"Murphy brought Miss Wellspring safely aboard, of course?"

"Of course; she's in her state-room, I believe," with a glance down the long vista toward the ladies' cabin.

Slowly the time passed to Rufus Cramp, and as the hour drew near he went up to the hurricane-deck, fiercely smoking his cigar, fearing he scarcely knew what.

"Off at last!" uttered a voice behind him, that caused him to give a mighty start it was so like that of Duke Derringer. "Pardon; may I beg a light?" suavely added the gentleman, so unlike the Duke of Derringers in every respect that Cramp laughed aloud at his own folly.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUKE IS "WANTED."

"I want you!"

Probably no other combination of words in the English language are so full of meaning, of terror, of sickening despair, of benumbing fate, as these simple words when spoken to a criminal by one whom he knows is clothed in authority.

It may be doubted whether the same criminal, listening to the words in which his judge sentences him to execution on a certain day, is not less shocked, is not better prepared to make the most of the chances still remaining for him. That doom he has been prepared to receive, but "*I want you!*" comes so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that even to one wholly unconscious of wrong-doing, it sounds like the crack of doom.

The Duke of Derringers, as he heard that significant announcement, shrunk back a little, his free hand mechanically moving toward his breast, where his faithful weapons lay.

The grip on his bridle hand tightened, and quick as thought itself the chief of police elevated the muzzle of his revolver until Barringer could look straight down the ugly tube.

"Don't try that, Duke," Tullar said, his voice growing cold and hard. "I'd hate to hurt you, worse than any man I know, but when I go for a man, he's got to come, dead or alive!"

"Alive it is, then," laughed the gentleman sport, quickly regaining his customary coolness, turning his empty palm toward the chief, in token of surrender.

"That's hearty, and more like you, Duke. It's simply a matter of business, you understand?"

"Clear as the Mississippi on a boom, chief," laughed the gambler, apparently quite himself again. "You want me, you say?"

Chief Tullar nodded. He really regretted it, but duty was his god. And he knew that a cool-headed man like this was a slippery prisoner to hold, alone and unaided.

"And on business? It hardly seems possible, I have been such a good boy of late years. You are sure that there is no mistake?"

"Not on my part, Duke," coldly responded the chief.

His face grew graver, and the muzzle of his

revolver crept a little closer to the heart of the gentlemen sport. He did not like this cool bantering. It looked too much like conscious guilt, rather than the hot indignation an innocently accused man is expected to display on all such occasions.

"And the king can do no wrong!" smiled the Duke of Derringers, in his most graceful, airy manner. "I'm yours to command, Martin, until you get rid of the dust some busybody has been sprinkling in those beautiful eyes of yours. Which reminds me—which particular sin have I been guilty of on this occasion, chief?"

"The charge is felonious assault, coupled with highway robbery."

Duke Barringer gave a little start, and his face suddenly grew hard and fixed. There was an ugly light flashing into his jetty orbs that fairly startled the chief into raising his revolver higher.

"Don't speak too quick, or say too much, Duke," he hurriedly muttered. "I'll have to tell it all when I'm asked, you know."

"Why not, Martin?" and Duke was once more the bland, smiling man of the world. "It would take such a little time to unburden your mind, that nobody could grudge the waste. And—I'll lay you a basket of wine that I can name the party who has been so shamefully hoaxing you this early in the morning, chief?"

"I could wish you might find it a harder job, Duke," retorted the officer, with a brief, grim smile.

"Why, man alive!" in a tone of surprise and injured friendship, "surely you don't for an instant imagine it anything but a hoax?"

"The fault don't lay with me, then. The charge was made and sworn to by two persons. The story they told was straight and circumstantial enough for— You've had a bit of nose-bleed on the top o' your head, Duke!" abruptly uttered the chief, making a swift motion across his own temple with the muzzle of his cocked revolver.

Mechanically Duke lifted his hand, to feel a little streak of dried blood from the bullet-wound on his scalp. He laughed softly as he saw the triumphant sparkle in the eyes of the shrewd chief.

"That's the affair you allude to, is it, Martin?"

"Worse luck for the both of us; you to be mixed up in it, and I to be the first of the force to run afoul of you, Duke?"

There was a trace of genuine regret in the chief's tones as he uttered these words, and instantly there came a change over the sport. All flippancy vanished, and his manner was earnestness itself as he leaned over in the saddle and spoke to Tullar:

"Chief, as man to man, I ask a favor of you. Go with me to my room at the hotel, and listen to the story I have to tell before you arrest me. I don't ask it for myself alone, but to save an innocent girl from the grip of as foul a scoundrel as ever drew the breath of life!"

"That same scoundrel has a name, Duke?"

"You know it—Rufus Cramp," was the instant response.

The chief laughed shortly.

"Faith, he seems to the full as anxious to put you under arrest as you do to keep from it! He it was that made the charge against you."

"I felt sure of it—the cowardly cur!"

"It isn't his word alone I'd take, ye know, Duke," earnestly uttered the chief, seeming to forget his duty for the time being. "But when the old lady swore so straight—and one o' them sun-machines is a fool beside her when it comes to painting a portrait!—when she described you in every respect as the head one of the robbers, what else could I do, Duke? Nothing shorter than send out word to all the force to take you in when and wherever they spotted you; with Tom Kearney for make-weight!"

"They'll find Tom and Shoe-string Johnny somewhere along the road between here and the spot where the coach was stopped—"

"Go easy, Duke!" warningly muttered the honest chief.

"Instead of hiding anything from you, dear man, there's nothing I'd like better than to tell you the whole story, so far as I'm concerned in it," smiled Duke, though still serious, earnest, anxious. "That's why I asked you as a favor to take me to my room, first of all."

Chief Tullar gazed at the gentleman sport keenly. Beyond a doubt he was in deep earnest. But why? Was it with personal fear and anxiety alone, or had he really important information to give?

"I pledge you my word of honor to make no effort to escape or get the better of you on the way, chief," hurriedly muttered the Duke of Derringers, his anxiety increasing as he noted the rapid lapse of time. "As an earnest—see!"

He leaned forward and with his free hand pointed to where his derringers were concealed, then elevated the member above his head.

Tullar quickly secured the tools, slipping them into his own pockets. As he did so, Barringer added:

"I have two more, which I will hand you if you choose, giving the same pledge not to attempt to use them offensively."

"I'm not slow on the trigger myself," grimly

smiled the chief, "but trust for trust, Duke! Hand over the tools, and I'll not put on the darbies yet awhile."

"You'll take me to my room, where we can talk this over comfortably, then?" eagerly cried the gambler, his eyes aglow.

"Why not, man?" but with the sober addition: "It'll only be a wee bit later, for ye understand that I've got to run 'em in. The charge is serious, regularly entered, and I've got to do my duty."

"You wouldn't be Martin Tullar if you ever fell short," laughed the Duke of Derringers, surrendering another brace of those terribly effective weapons, then assuming his wonted graceful air, he dropped to the ground, passing one arm through that of the chief, holding the bridle-reins over the other.

No one who saw the twain passing up the middle of the street in this fashion, pleasantly chatting together, would have for a moment suspected the nature of the tie between them.

Murtogh Murphy's stable was reached, and though nothing was to be seen of that worthy—who was just then leisurely driving back from the wharf with the Wellspring coach—Barringer left his horse to be taken care of, after which the two men, still arm in arm, hastened on to the hotel where the Duke of Derringers had his room.

Though time was so pressing, Duke showed no particular haste in passing through the bar. He not only took a drink with the chief, but gave particular orders with the barkeeper to send up a couple of bottles of wine, with cigars, to his room.

"It isn't a bribe ye're offering me, I'm trusting, Duke," laughed Tullar, as he occupied the one chair, Barringer seating himself on the edge of the bed with the little table drawn between them.

"That oughtn't surprise you so much, chief, since you evidently think me ass enough to attempt highway robbery—and fail!" laughed his host, with a vivid flash in his dark eyes.

"Not robbery for gold, Duke," was the swift objection. "I wouldn't take Saint Peter's oath for *that*! But—the young lady was there, so I'm given to understand; the same you—"

"Caned Rufus Cramp for insulting; precisely."

"Divil blame you for that same, honey; sure no one else would!" cried Tullar, with a smile over the top of his refilled glass.

Duke hesitated, his face showing some emotion. He found the matter a difficult one to open, now that he fairly confronted it. Yet he must do so, and with slight loss of time. If the Superb should leave before he could come to a satisfactory understanding with the chief! If Rufus Cramp thus got the start of him—

"Only for that same lady, nothing of this ugly affair would have taken place, Tullar," he began, only to be interrupted by the chief, who, now that he had once relaxed a little from the line of strict duty, was showing his ordinary nature: jolly, genial, if a bit coarse.

"It don't call for three eyes to see that same, me boy! Divil blame ye, if he likes, for it isn't me that would! They say she's all as swate and handsome as she will be rich when the old man—"

Barringer cut him short with an impatient wave of the hand and a tone so cold and stern that one far less acute than the worthy chief could not fail to take warning.

"No more of that, sir. I am forced to bring the name of a lady into our conversation for her own safety, but not even you can speak of her lightly, even in sport."

"It isn't me that wants to speak of her at all, if you come to that," tartly retorted the chief, once more his official self, setting down the untasted liquor and drawing his athletic figure erect.

"Nor I, if it could be avoided," gravely.

"Then the shortest way is the easiest, sir. I give you back your parole. You can tell your story to the judge, when you appear before him," coldly uttered the chief, rising to his feet.

"I must tell you first, Tullar," earnestly said Duke, leaning forward and placing a hand on the arm of the offended official. "If I have touched your feelings, I beg your pardon. When I have told you all, you will understand something of my embarrassment. Sit down, please!"

After a momentary hesitation, Tullar complied. That he had been sharply stung was evident from his forgetting to replace the parole he had voluntarily surrendered. Did Barringer notice that fact? If so, he made no sign, and certainly did not mention the fact.

Casting aside all reserve, the Duke of Derringers quickly and clearly detailed all that he had overheard while eavesdropping Shoe-string Johnny and Tom Kearney in the adjoining room, even to the manner in which he had foiled their cautious investigation of the instinctive fears which assailed the petty gambler. He told how he followed up the important clue thus obtained. How Murtogh Murphy put him on the right track, banishing the last doubt he had entertained as to the correctness of the interpretation he had on their words. How he had taken horse and rode out on the route to Fair-

view, lying in wait until he saw the two bogus robbers pass by, with bundles attached to their saddles, which he felt convinced contained their disguises.

Briefly but clearly he told how he managed to dog them to their selected ambush without awakening their suspicions; how he watched and waited until the coach came along to be halted; how, when their object was placed beyond a reasonable doubt, he had taken an active hand in the game, sending both the lesser ruffians out of it with crippled arms, only himself to be foiled by Rufus Cramp while striving to control the frightened horses.

He went on to tell how he had taken the two wounded wretches captive, and gave a substantial account of what followed. They had confessed the whole truth, and when they were captured by the police, as they surely would be, how certain he felt that they would confirm his story in every particular.

"I would have brought them to town, myself," he added, earnestly, "if time had not been so pressing. My first duty, as a man and a gentleman, belonged to Miss Wellspring. I felt that somehow that scoundrel would make another attempt to separate her from her guardian, for some vile purpose. I might foil him, or at least hold him in check; and so I will, if you will give me leave to run to the landing where—"

He paused abruptly. A dogged expression was settling over the face of the chief, bidding poorly for his success. As a man, Martin Tullar sympathized with aim. As an official, he knew but one course to pursue. An arrest had been made on a regularly entered charge. He was responsible for the prisoner, and would remain so until the arrest was regularly reported and that sacred obligation discharged. Then, if all was favorable, he might—

"It will be too late, then!" cried the Duke of Derringers, hotly, as though he could read the thoughts of his captor in his face. "It is now nearly time for the boat to pull out, and if it once leaves with that demon in charge of Miss Wellspring, she will—"

"The old lady is with her, and she's more than a match for Cramp and a dozen like him," coldly uttered the chief. "I'll do all that I can for her and for you, but there's a limit—one I've already overstepped, I'm thinking!"

"At least, go with me to the boat and detain Cramp as witness," urged Barringer earnestly. The chief shook his head, doggedly.

"I can't afford to run the chances. You're too awful earnest, Mr. Barringer. The temptation might overmaster ye, and—"

"If I take a solemn oath not to attempt an escape?"

"Duty is duty, and I've no right to ask or receive a pledge."

"But if the life—the honor—of a lady depends on—"

"She isn't in my charge, but you are. But I'll do all I can. I'll detain Cramp, as a witness, after I've run you in according to rule."

"All right, chief," said the Duke of Derringers, coldly, as he rose from the bed. "Have your own way. But first—let me say one thing, and in so saying, I am taking an oath a thousand-fold more sacred than the duty you prate about!"

"If aught of harm or trouble comes to Miss Wellspring through Rufus Cramp, which I might have prevented but for this arrest, I'll hunt you to your death if I swing for it! Don't forget, Martin Tullar!"

"There's many another threat older than yours, Mr. Barringer," the chief said, grimly, also rising and putting on his hat. "I'm living yet, and I'll keep on living long after you've asked pardon for them crooked words. Now, if you please, sir, we'll—"

He never finished the sentence audibly.

With a swift, dexterous movement, the Duke of Derringers caught up the coverlet and cast it over the head and shoulders of the chief, twisting it tightly and pinning both arms to his side, lifting the thoroughly surprised official clear of the floor and doubling him over the foot of the bed, adding his own weight, exerting his great strength to the utmost, both to prevent any outcry or any discharge of pistol.

Even on equal footing, with but Nature's arms, Martin Tullar would have been overmatched by the athlete, but taken at such a frightful disadvantage, he was almost as helpless as a child. Bent backward over the footboard, his head muffled almost to suffocation, his body rapidly growing paralyzed by the awful pressure on his back that threatened to dislocate his spine, with one sinewy arm clasping his arms, one strong hand clutching at his throat, with the Duke of Derringers's legs twined about his lower members, keeping him from sounding any alarm with his heavily-shod feet; what wonder that his subjection was speedily effected?

"You would have it this way, chief!" grated Barringer, his black eyes filled with a red glow that was little short of ferocious. "I gave you every chance, but you threw them over your shoulder. You even gave me back my parole, though that would hardly have held me quiet, knowing as I do the peril that threatens her!"

Unrelentingly the Duke of Derringers main-

tained his terrible advantage, yet closely watching for the time when it would be safe for him to let up for a moment. This soon came. The dull quiver that ran through the chest of the helpless man told him as much. He could feel the strained muscles quivering, fluttering, growing weaker until they yielded all at once. And just in time to keep from breaking the bare of the luckless chief, Barringer lifted his weight, though still holding the man's legs clasped tightly between his, still his fingers ready to close again upon the throat if a cry should well up from his lungs.

But nothing of the sort was attempted, and as he swiftly unwound the coverlet, laying bare the face of his adversary, Duke felt his heart give a rapid flutter and a cold thrill flash over his person.

Martin Tullar looked like a corpse, and that of one who had died in horrible agony!

"So be it, if it must!" the gambler muttered to himself as he lifted the body in his arms and placed it in a natural position on the bed. "I didn't think to kill the poor devil, but if it came to a choice between that and her safety, I would do it all over again!"

Precious as the moments now were, believing as he did that the Superb was to leave for upriver on schedule time, Duke wasted several minutes in striving to restore the consciousness of his victim. And it was with a genuine sigh of relief that he felt the stilled heart slowly resume its workings, that he saw by the twitching of the distorted features, the clinched fingers, that life was surely if slowly returning. And satisfied of this, he lost no time in making the fruits of his victory certain.

He stripped the chief of his weapons, carefully stowing away those belonging to himself, dropping the rest into the water ewer after removing the caps from the revolvers, so that the water would quickly destroy their usefulness for some hours, at least.

This done, Duke tore the strong coverlet into strips, with which he bound the chief hand and foot, the folds many, the knots numerous. With other folds he tied the man to the bed in such a manner that he could neither roll himself off nor kick the partition with his feet. He made a stout gag, and watching his chance when Tullar began to gasp, he slipped it between his teeth, holding it firmly there, despite the feeble struggles of the defeated official, while he bound a heavy towel firmly over the gag and mouth as well.

"You wouldn't take anything less disagreeable, chief," placidly uttered the Duke of Derringers, bending over the now fully conscious prisoner. "I offered you chance after chance, but you threw them all over your shoulder. Well, I hope you'll have time enough to fully realize your folly before this room is visited again!"

If looks could kill, the Duke of Derringers would have fallen dead before the last word left his lips. Instead, he laughed softly, yet with a certain tinge of gravity even in that.

"If only men like you and myself were engaged in the game, chief, I wouldn't have stooped so low as this," he added, still gazing down into the reddening, rage-inflamed face. "After trying plain arguments, as I did, without softening your stubborn ideas of duty, I would have yielded to you as winner, with what grace I might summon, since there must be one winner for every loser. But there was more at stake. You should be acute enough to see that Rufus Cramp plainly means evil to a young lady whose only defender by rights, is far away—perhaps even out of this world!"

"You wouldn't help me to protect her, and so I had to do my best without regard to your feelings. I'm sorry, but—it had to be so!"

As he spoke, the Duke of Derringers turned his captive over so that he lay with his face to the wall, replacing the bonds which he had to loosen a trifle to effect the change. And then, as though to render it still more impossible for the prisoner to see what transpired in the room, or else, it might be, to effectually shield his form or dress from any one who might choose to investigate matters through the open transom over the door, he covered the chief over head and foot with the sheets, even making a sort of triangular ambush for the head, by laying a blanket over the headboard and bringing one end down to the side of the bed, tucking it firmly beneath the mattress.

It would be a lurid page that recorded all the thoughts that raged through the seething brain of the chief, as he lay thus hampered at the sweet mercy of his one-time captive. How he cursed his folly in temporizing even for a moment with a man like the Duke of Derringers! How he reviled himself for losing sight of his sacred duty even for an instant! If he had acted on his usual rule, and rushed his prisoner at once to the station-house?

And how he cursed the man who had so thoroughly conquered and made him a laughing-stock for the entire force.

"Kill me! Cut my throat before you leave, Duke Barringer!" he tried to cry out in his suffocating rage. "Kill me, or I'll play even with you yet! The whole world isn't half big enough to hold us apart! Truer, surer than a bloodhound, I'll track you down! And then—"

His anger and hatred were far too intense for him to readily decide on the precise punishment he would mete out to this audacious rascal!

For some moments all had been silent in the room, save for the rapid, heavy thumping of his own heart. Had the Duke of Derringers already escaped? If he had, and some of his men should—

A shuffling, peculiar sound checked his thoughts, and a moment later he heard the Duke of Derringers utter:

"I'll not ask your pardon for this harsh treatment, chief, for I know it would be breath thrown away in vain. Still, I don't want you to judge me too harshly. For myself alone, I would never take such a course with a gentleman like you—for when you are out of harness, or permit yourself to forget the shop for a bit, you are a gentleman, Martin! I tell you this now, when I'm on the point of running away from you, and if I live long enough to make the round trip, I'll tell you the same thing over again when I get back."

"Of course you won't credit me when I say that I'm not running away from that absurd charge, Martin. You're far too hot for that, and I'm not blaming you; I'd be boiling over myself if I filled your suit. But, all the same, it's gospel truth. I've already proved the charge a vile lie on his part, an absurd mistake on the part of the old lady. I might even prove this by the rascals that devil paid to commit the outrage if I could spare a couple of hours. If you capture them, as no doubt you will, say that you saw me, and I'll warrant they'll weaken sufficiently to let you see how wide you are of the mark just now."

All the time the Duke of Derringers was uttering these sentences, broken by brief intervals, now and then, the chief could dimly catch certain peculiar sounds which he vainly strove to interpret. He tried to turn over, to twist his head sufficiently to catch a glimpse of the speaker, but in vain. Barringer had looked too carefully to his fastenings for anything like that.

"One word more, Martin," came that voice, now grave and earnest. "I pledge you my word of honor that I will come back at the earliest possible moment to meet this charge, or if that fails to the ground, to offer you whatever satisfaction you care to exact of me for this harsh treatment. I swear I'll do this! And now I'm going. You'll not have so many hours to wait. I'll give up the room when I go down, and a maid will soon come up to see if all is in order. So, once more, good-by!"

The door opened, the key turned in the lock as it shut again. Martin Tullar could hear quick footfalls receding, and then—

"Take him, lads!" he mentally howled, struggling fiercely, vainly.

CHAPTER IX.

A SICKLY PASSENGER.

THE good steamer Superb, Iles, captain, was steadily plowing her way up the coffee-colored Mississippi, making fair time just at present, but having long lost all chance of breaking the record, even for second-class boats, at the head of which rank she was confessed to stand, even by her detractors.

Now, as on so many previous occasions—so many that it had become something of a by-word among the river men who had leisure to chat over such affairs—the fates appeared to work against her, although, with his customary truthfulness, Captain George Iles had openly declared his intention of "going for that broom" with his pet boat. One thing and another had delayed her. The water proved to be lower than it had any right to be, at that season of the year, and one totally unexpected sandbar had, this early, put in a claim of several hours duration before it could be persuaded with steam and spars to release the symmetrical water nymph from its close embrace.

On the whole, as Clerk Hoover had gently intimated, Rufus Cramp had little cause for complaint, taking one thing with another. Portia Wellspring was aboard, while Aunt Honor Magill was ashore. The police had not put in an appearance, neither had aught been seen or heard of the Duke of Derringers.

Rufus Cramp was slowly, irregularly pacing the hurricane deck, his face pale and lined, his blue eyes gleaming with poorly concealed anxiety. Perhaps it was as well that he was alone on deck, with that tell-tale face; and yet, what was there to suspect? Who was there to suspect, least of all him?

By this time, his position on board was pretty generally comprehended by the majority of the passengers. It was known that he was acting as escort to Miss Wellspring, who was summoned to the bedside of her father, the five-fold millionaire. It was known that no word had been received as to the sick man's condition since his envoy left him at St. Louis, more than a week ago. And all on board knew how weary the beautiful daughter was finding the delayed voyage, although only the small minority had even caught a glimpse of her pale, sad face, while not more than one or two of the lady passengers had interchanged speech with her.

With the exception of that one brief shock—

the voice—the voice that so strangely reminded him of the Duke of Derringers—as the Superb at length took her departure from the wharf, everything had gone as smooth with Rufus Cramp as the most exacting could have expected or even wished for.

Having learned that Portia Wellspring had at once betaken herself to her state-room on going aboard, he would not disturb her while she remained quiet, which he hoped would be until after the starting of the vessel. So it proved, but when Portia saw nothing of Aunt Honor, and the coffee-colored stewardess declared that she knew nothing of any such person, the poor girl roused herself sufficient to send a message to Rufus Cramp, asking for a moment's interview.

The schemer was idly chatting with Mark Landrum—the man whose voice had given him such a chilling shock, but whose face and general appearance no more resembled those of the gentleman sport than his voice did, on cool comparison—when the message was given him, and he immediately complied with the request, only a little tightening of the muscles about his lips betraying any uneasiness.

It was a bold game he was playing, and Rufus Cramp proved himself a bold and successful liar. His explanation was all ready, and with rare tact he broke the sad, vexatious news to poor Portia.

Aunt Honor was not aboard, simply because she was physically unable to bear the trip, even if she could have been carried to the boat in time, which was more than doubtful.

Pale, trembling, fearing the worst, Portia begged the heartless villain to tell her all without further preface.

Rufus Cramp told how they laid information before the chief of police concerning the bold attempt at highway robbery. This duty performed, he called a carriage, and with Aunt Honor started for the boat.

There had an unfortunate accident occurred, but one which might have been far worse, he earnestly assured the poor girl. Aunt Honor was injured by the runaway and smash-up. A broken limb, with some additional bruises, but nothing so serious that time and care would not set aright again.

As proof that he was not trying to soften the shock by underestimating the danger of her kind friend, Rufus Cramp placed in her hands a sealed note—written by himself since coming aboard—in which, over the name of a fictitious M. D., Portia read that Mrs. Magill was in no danger, save of confinement for a few weeks.

"Why did you not tell me? Poor aunt!" sobbed the girl, hot tears spotting the cunning forgery which she held in her trembling hands.

On this point, as all others, Rufus Cramp was guarded. As in duty bound, he had seen that the injured lady was placed under skillful and considerate hands, though he knew in so doing he was running the risk of losing passage on the Superb. Only for the unexpected delay in starting, he must have been too late, despite his utmost efforts. As it was, he had barely succeeded in reaching the boat as she was moving off.

Even if he had sent word to Portia the moment the accident occurred, she could not have reached her relative and had time to return to the boat. She would have had to decide between risking the loss of her passage, or seeming neglect of her guardian.

"I took upon myself to decide for you, Miss Wellspring, and if I acted wrongly, believe me it was with the best of intentions. I knew your father so ardently longed for you, and—"

Her sobs cut him short, but her trembling hand touched his in token that he had indeed acted for the best, all things concerned. As her face was buried in a kerchief, the schemer relieved himself by a silent laugh that told how immensely he was relieved at having successfully gotten over what he had feared would prove a serious stumbling-block in his path.

On the whole, Rufus Cramp had ample cause to congratulate his lucky stars, thus far. Everything seemed to be working smoothly, and if the other hands in the dangerous game were to play their parts as admirably as he had and was playing his, ultimate success was certain.

With no one to talk with, no one to listen to her hopes and fears, none to nourish the one or banish the other, it is not to be wondered at that Portia for the time being forgot her dislike to Rufus Cramp. He was the chosen messenger of her poor father—who might even then be feebly gasping out his life! He could tell her of his illness, of his last words, of his longings for her, his only living child. And so, it was not strange that already she had passed more than one hour on the hurricane-deck with him, after the friendly shades of evening fell over the river, or in the early morning, when there were fewer to gaze curiously upon her veiled figure.

Taking all this into consideration, one would have thought Rufus Cramp might at least look content, might smile instead of frown, might hum joyous tunes as he promenaded his solitary beat, instead of grinding curses betwixt his strong, white teeth.

He kept casting keen, searching looks along the right shore of the river, now and then pausing and gazing steadily for several seconds at

some particular point, only to resume his rapid strides and his muttered oaths. Yet there was little to be seen of interest in that direction. The scenery was the same wild, desolate, monotonous, dreary waste that it had been for many hours past, very different in those comparatively remote days, when millions had not been expended on the great river and its banks, when far less of civilization marked the course of the vast waterway, than at the present time.

Once more Rufus Cramp came to an abrupt stop in his tramp, intently gazing at something on shore. It must have been something of far more than ordinary interest, since his hands trembled so violently that not even tight clinching could hide the fact.

Yet surely it was not so strange that a man, apparently a wood-cutter, or maybe a hunter, should happen to be on the shore as the Superb passed by. Nor even the fact that he waved his hat and danced around as though cheering the vessel on its way. That was a sight one could see any day, any time, without giving it more than a passing thought, a fleeting smile.

The pilot simply glanced toward the fellow, then continued to read the mysterious revelations of the waters. The fellow was not hailing the boat, so there was nothing to interest him.

Some of the passengers on the guards below, in the shade, laughed at and returned the stranger's salute. So it is not very strange that Rufus Cramp should do the same thing. The fact would hardly be worth mentioning, perhaps, only for the loss this act of courtesy gave rise to on our friend's part. He dropped his fine silk handkerchief, which went floating, circling through the air astern, like some fantastic red bird. But Rufus Cramp did not even glance after the article, much less attempt to recover it before it got beyond reach. He seemed wholly enjoying the antics of the excited fellow on shore, who just then cast his hat high into the air, by way of a parting salute.

Some of the passengers laughed again at this ebullition, then forgot the stranger and the incident. Rufus Cramp kept gazing in that direction for some little time, only turning away with a short, quick breath as he caught sight of a column of black smoke rising from near the spot where the enthusiastic stranger had plunged into the bushes.

Native wilderness though this shore appeared from the boat, it was evident there were inhabitants, for the keenly roving eyes of Rufus Cramp soon detected a second smoke rising above the undergrowth, fully a mile up the river. And soon after, a third. Really, this sort of traveling was not altogether monotonous!

Rufus Cramp had a speaking acquaintance with the pilot on duty, as he had with the majority of river men of that date, though he could not be said to be a general favorite. Free-handed enough, using the choicest of cigars, which he seemed to take pleasure in seeing other people smoking, ever ready to take a drink or a hand at cards, for either plain amusement or substantial business, he seldom met with a snub or a repulse, even if his society was not courted. And so, when he ventured to enter the pilot-house, the man on duty gave him a nod of welcome that told he was not altogether in the way.

Rufus Cramp knew enough not to overwhelm the pilot with idle talk or pointless questions. He seemed content to sit on the bench and enjoy the cool, breezy shade, after his long promenade in the afternoon sun. He noted the smokes as the boat passed them by, but apparently did not deem them worthy of remark.

The smokes died away, as though their mission was performed. There came sundry little breaks in the undergrowth that seemed to speak of approaching settlements. And then, a quick flash illumined the eyes of Rufus Cramp as they rested on a cleared space, not quite half a mile above their present position, and he ventured his first remark:

"Paulets Landing! So far up? Really, I had lost my reckoning!"

"And I'm hoping there won't be no call for a landing, this trip," muttered the pilot, letting the wheel glide smoothly through his hands for a few spokes. "The water is so peskily low, and that's a fool-place for a landing, at the best!"

"Not much danger, I reckon," with a little laugh. "Business don't seem to flourish at Paulets. I wonder if the old fellow is as fat as ever?"

"It isn't hard work that'll ever make him leaner, anyhow," laughed the pilot. "The boys tell a story about—There it is!" he broke off with something that smelled of the infernal regions, as his keen eye detected a signal for the boat to make a landing at Paulets.

"It's all in a lifetime," laughed Cramp, pinching his pale lips. "And we can hardly hope to break the record, even without another stop between this and St. Louis."

The pilot said nothing, and Rufus Cramp left the pilot-house. Apparently he took little interest in the art of landing, from that standpoint. Perhaps he was dry, for he at once descended to the bar, where he found the captain talking and drinking with Mark Landrum.

"Poison me, Tommy," laughed Cramp, nod-

ding toward the barkeeper. "Mason, up yonder, is so hot he actually made me thirsty! There's a signal out at Paulets, and the old fellow's cursing all blue at the idea of making a landing with the water so low."

"It is a nuisance," said the captain, with a little frown. "I was in hopes we might even yet catch up with the record, but if we have to run in at every one-horse landing between here and—"

His voice died away as he left the bar.

The landing was difficult, but those difficulties were skillfully met and overcome. The boat was made fast, and the single gang was run out, for it was evident to the initiated that there was no freight to be landed at Paulets this time.

Fat Paulets himself, panting and puffing under the weight of a pair of old-fashioned valises of tapestry, came into view, delivering his burden to the porter at the end of the gang-plank. Behind him came two gentlemen, one supporting the other with tender care, almost carrying him, in fact.

Among others, for passengers are ever ready for anything that can break the monotony of such a trip, Rufus Cramp stood on the guards, watching the passengers as they came aboard. And as the taller, stronger one of the latter lifted his face for a moment from guiding his companion, one of the men on the guards exclaimed:

"Kyte Darley, as I'm a sinner! What on earth dropped him here, and who can that sickly-looking fellow be?"

"A pigeon, maybe," laughed another, who also seemed to be acquainted with the gentleman.

"Plumper in pocket than in person, or our kite will get but a sorry meal this round," muttered still a third.

Rufus Cramp also recognized his friend, though he said nothing. He seemed more interested in the sickly-looking passenger, who was slowly and tremblingly passing over the narrow plank, supported and guided by Kyte Darley.

Slender, frail enough he seemed, despite the heavy cloak that muffled his body, up to his very eyes. The passing glimpse they caught of his face, showed them only ghastly pallor, deepened by the jetty eyebrows and curling hair that fell damply over his forehead.

"Looking for a coffin, I should say!" muttered one of the men who had spoken before. "It can't be a game of cards Kyte is after; that poor devil hasn't strength enough to deal a hand!"

"That needn't hinder; Darley could deal for both, and it would amount to the same thing in the end."

Apparently they had not the highest possible opinion of the handsome, sleepy-eyed sport.

The Superb left the landing and once more resumed her journey up the river. The crowd on the guards gradually drifted away, and resumed their efforts at killing time. With a wearied air, Rufus Cramp entered the office, dropping into a chair and picking up a paper that laid on the table, barely nodding to Kyte Darley as he entered. The sickly passenger was sitting in an arm-chair, doubled over, his head sunk on his chest, seemingly exhausted by his recent efforts.

"Pretty full, Mr. Darley, as you can see," said Hoover, as Kyte bent over the register. "There's only one state-room left, but it's a choice one, near the middle, and—"

"But I want two rooms," interposed Darley, frowning a little.

"Impossible, just at present. To-morrow, perhaps, unless we have the bad luck to find another stray bar," smiled the clerk. "Until then you can worry along with one, surely? Your friend can—"

"A comparative stranger, of whom I know nothing more than his mere name and that he is very feeble. I helped him aboard, but that's all."

"Maybe I can bunk him with some other, if you insist on having the room to yourself."

"Let me see the list again," muttered Darley, after a covert glance at the sickly passenger. "He needs the room more than I do, and maybe I can find—By the way, Cramp?"

"You can have a berth with me, Darley, of course," said Rufus.

"Until another room is vacated—good enough!" and Kyte with a free pen wrote down the name of his sickly companion: "Wilfred Bangs."

"I can't swear as to his place of residence, you know," with a little laugh. "Poor devil!" in the same guarded tone. "It's not a work of prophecy to give the place he's bound for, in a hurry!"

"I hope he'll last our time, anyway. Going to St. Louis, is he?"

"Unless he drops off on the road. Give me the key and I'll help him to his room. If he has any friends, they'd ought to be kicked for permitting him to take such a jaunt alone!"

Kyte Darley was as good as his word, and assisted the sickly passenger to the state-room, soon after emerging and returning to the office, where he encountered the grinning porter.

"Take this bag to Mr. Cramp's room, and leave the other with the sick gentleman. He's got change enough to make it worth your while to lend him a hand in case he needs anything, Cuffee."

"Yes, sah, t'ank 'e sah!" chuckled the porter, slipping a shining coin into his pocket before picking up the valises.

Kyte Darley took a drink with the genial clerk and several others whom he recognized, lit a cigar and strolled idly out of the office. He caught sight of Rufus Cramp, who just then turned and passed up the steep side-ladder to the hurricane deck, whither Kyte followed him.

The sun was setting, the evening delightfully cool and refreshing there on the broad river. Several other men were pacing the tarred and graveled deck, smoking their cigars and enjoying the cool breeze that renders river travel in summer so delightful.

Each man seemed sufficient unto himself, just then, and really a conversation could be carried on there in as much privacy, so far as conversation was concerned, as though they had the deck wholly to themselves.

"Well?" asked Kyte Darley, as he gained the side of his fellow plotter and fell into his slow, leisurely stride.

"It is well: and with you?" muttered Rufus, guardedly.

"All serene. Any word from the Ancient?"

"Not a syllable! I don't know what to make of it," and Rufus corrugated his light brows. "Surely that old scoundrel can't have hung on until now?"

"It begins to look like it," was the thoughtful response. "If so, and I was in the place the Ancient fills, he'd be pretty apt to have a serious relapse before the Superb can reach St. Louis. He knows you are on the way, of course?"

"Of course. I sent him word before leaving."

"I see Miss W. is on board. Have any particular trouble?"

"More than I bargained for," with a smothered oath.

As briefly as he could, and yet explain all clearly, Rufus Cramp detailed his experience thus far in the difficult game. And in return Kyte Darley gave a whispered account of his doings since they parted on the down-trip.

Not without break were these communications made. At odd times some of the parading passengers would drop a word or a query which demanded attention, and whenever they passed within ear-shot of any others, the plotters changed their talk to everyday affairs, or something that could by no possibility give a clew to their evil schemes.

Still, by the time the call to supper cleared the dock of hungry passengers, the two evil schemers had brought their stories to a completion, or nearly enough to leave them at liberty to make the best use of the favorable opening thus afforded them.

"How do you stand with the fair one?" asked Kyte, eagerly.

"Better than I dared hope," was the prompt reply. "Do you know, Darley, if this trip could be doubled in length, I have faith I could more than win back my old position in her good graces?"

"It can't be doubled; and if you are idiot enough to grow soft and milk-hearted at this stage of the game, old man, I know who'll have to pay the piper!" sharply muttered the other, giving a savage grip to the arm that swung nearest him.

"Don't fly off the handle now," was the cool retort. "I'm only giving you a glimpse of what might be, but what will never come to pass. I wouldn't give up the little girl—"

"When you win her."

Rufus Cramp laughed harshly as Kyte dropped this remark.

"If I fail, don't think there's any room for you to come in, Kyte. If I can make, I can also break; and unless the game goes my way without a ruffe, there'll come the crack of doom to us all. You know me!"

"And can envy, without wanting to rob you, old fellow," laughed the other, lightly. "Don't forget that! And now—once more. How do you stand with the angel? Can you fill the contract on short notice?"

"At a moment's notice, if necessary," was the prompt response.

"To-night, then?" hurriedly muttered Kyte, as a light footfall came toward them and a tall figure paused by their side, a voice uttering:

"Pardon, gentlemen, but my cigar has gone out. Can you oblige me with a light?" asked the intruder, suavely, without seeming to notice the simultaneous start which the plotters gave as he spoke.

CHAPTER X.

PLOTTING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

THIS wanting a light bade fair to become chronic with Mark Landrum, and a complaint that would probably create more or less hard feeling, unless he used greater discretion in choosing the time in which to prefer his request. And yet, uncomfortable as was this growing habit in itself, it was not to be compared with that other peculiarity: the usurpation of the voice of the Duke of Derringers.

For the second time since the wheels of the Superb began to churn the waters on its upward trip, Rufus Cramp felt that sickening cold chill creep up and down his spinal marrow, without

which he had never, since that fated day when the gentleman sport caned him in public for acting the brute, heard the voice of Duke Barringer.

Once before this, Mark Landrum had startled him, but then a single glance at the face of the speaker reassured the startled plotter, and it only required a second sentence to make him smile in his sleeve at his folly in detecting a resemblance that had no existence.

But now he could see that Kyte Darley was no whit less startled than himself, even going so far as to drop a hand on a pistol-butt.

"A charming evening, gentlemen," pleasantly added Mark Landrum, smiling until his white teeth gleamed in the dim starlight. "If one could always live thus, under the stars, free from the rush and turmoil of— 'Thanks,' with another bow as he deftly took the cigar from Rufus Cramp's hand, daintily flipping away the ashes and holding the ruddy end against his own fresh weed.

The light was quite sufficient to give such keen eyes as those of Kyte Darley a thorough view of the fellow's person, while the red glow of the cigars illumined his face quite plainly.

Tall, well-built, graceful in every movement, with the peculiar "something" about him that plainly proclaims the "man of the world," in figure Mark Landrum might have passed for the Duke of Derringers; but so, too, might half a dozen other passengers on board the Superb. His eyes, too, were large, dark and bright. But there the resemblance came to an end.

His hair was close-cropped, his face was smooth-shorn, with an even bronzed color that could not be mistaken for that of a man who has recently clipped off a luxuriant beard.

And, too, just as Rufus Cramp had noticed once before, the more Mark Landrum spoke, the less remarkable grew that resemblance, real or fancied, to the voice of the Duke of Derringers. It was *only* a resemblance. They were growing nervous, playing for such heavy stakes. They had been talking of this gambler who had so narrowly escaped ruining all at the very outset, and thus they foolishly mistook his voice. That was it!

The two schemers came to this conclusion at about the same time, and feeling that the sooner they could reach a final decision, the better it would be for their hopes of winning the Well-spring millions, they tried to elude this intruder, without arousing his suspicions that they considered him as such.

But apparently Mark Landrum was in a sociable mood that beautiful evening, turning as they turned, keeping pace whether they walked fast or slow, chatting idly, seeming content to do all the talking if his companions felt averse to perform their rightful share. Yet in it all there was nothing at which either of the plotters could take offense openly, without showing their cards too plainly, and at length, smothering a curse of vexation, Kyte Darley remembered that it was the hour for supper.

"So it is," cried Landrum, with a half-laugh, tossing his cigar over the railing and bearing them company as they descended from the hurricane-deck. "And one must eat, after all! It is vulgar, disgusting to think of in oneself or to watch in others, but—we all do it!"

The narrow steps afforded an excuse for breaking the linked arms, and watching his chance, Kyte cautiously whispered:

"To-night, without fail! Watch me, and follow my—"

Landrum was again beside them, and the whisper died away. But Kyte saw his fellow-plotter nod slightly in token that his meaning was comprehended, and no more was said until after the long table was reached.

A single glance showed Cramp that Portia Well-spring was not at the table, and so he did not take the trouble to pass on to the end set apart for the lady passengers, dropping into the first vacant chair he came to. He was not surprised at this, since Portia had preferred to take her meals in her own state-room. Still, he wished she had broken her custom this once; it would save trouble, and be less risky.

Kyte Darley, though usually a hearty feeder after his graceful way, wasted but very few minutes over the good things—and when or where could one fare better than on a "floating palace" in those "good old times" when the stuffy, dusty, noisy, head-ache-y railway cars were in their infancy, and the great rivers were the main arteries of travel?—and with a warning glance at Rufus Cramp, he pushed back his chair and hastened to the state-room which they were to share in common.

A glance showed Cramp that Mark Landrum was busily wrestling with the contents of his plate, seemingly with thoughts for nothing else, and he followed the example set him by Kyte.

As soon as he entered, Darley turned the key in the narrow door behind him, and with a sigh of relief dropped on the lower bunk.

"That prosing villain can't crowd himself in here, without giving us a fair excuse for bluffing him off after a fashion that would be far more agreeable to me than to him! Who is he, anyway?"

"More hawk than pigeon, I fancy," laughed Cramp.

"I thought you were old acquaintances, from his manner."

"Never met him before this trip. Indeed, he seems a stranger to all on board, though there is something about him that once in a while strikes me as—that is—"

"When he first spoke, I could have taken oath Duke Barringer was at our elbows!" exclaimed Kyte, with a dark frown.

"That's what I was trying to get at," returned Cramp, with a little sigh of relief. "Once before he gave me just such a shock, and I was on the point of lending him a few inches of cold steel, when one fair look into his face told me to spare the pains."

"Let him drop. We've more important business on hand than trying to spot his pedigree. You're all square with the girl?"

Rufus Cramp nodded assent.

"That's good news! I didn't know but what she'd be inclined to hold you at arm's length, despite the fact of your being the envoy of her dear daddy. You think you can turn the trick on short notice?"

"I don't see anything particular to hinder. It must be done this very night, of course?"

"Without fail," was the low, stern response.

"And your part of the arrangements?"

"There'll be no slip-up there."

"It would be awkward, you know—cursed awkward!" muttered Rufus Cramp, nervously fingering his under lip after the fashion inherited from his worthy father.

"Don't worry, old fellow," quietly retorted Kyte, with a cruel smile playing about his red lips, a tigerish glow in his eyes. "When I go in to play a game, I run the limits from start to finish. I knew just what was wanted, and I went to work accordingly. I have trusty men stationed a few miles apart, from the Landing up as far as this old tub can plow in twenty hours. They fully understand what they are to do, and are eager to win the reward which I promised the successful gang, aside from their regular wages. There will be half a dozen chances to turn the trick between this and day-break, but the sooner it is raked in, the better for us and our game."

"If there should be any serious hitch?"

"I tell you there will not, if you do your part. You saw how the trick was worked below the Landing? Could you have bettered it?"

Rufus Cramp shook his head.

"Well, each and every one of my fellows are trained just so perfectly," was the complacent response. "They will be ready to take care of the goods as soon as you deliver them. I will know, when the right moment comes, and if you keep your eyes and ears open, you will know it just as surely."

"You see," muttered Cramp, with a short laugh, "this is a bigger game than I am accustomed to playing, and it's not queer that I should feel a little nervous. There's a rope dangling at the other end!"

"With good five millions between you and the hemp; don't forget that part of the play, my dear fellow," laughed Kyte.

"And not one dollar too much, either!"

"To say nothing of the gentle Marcial! Put the two prizes together, and you have enough to pay you for depopulating half the world!"

A bright glow came into the sallow face of the weaker-nerved plotter at the mention of this name. As much as lay in his shallow nature, he was in love with the child of Remus Wellspring. But for her, he told himself, he would wash his hands of this dangerous work.

"She knows? She is all ready for her part?" he muttered, softly.

"Of course; she helped me make the arrangements. Without her intimate knowledge of the ground, and lacking her clear, bright wits, I could hardly have succeeded so well," was the prompt reply.

Rufus frowned, biting his under lip savagely. A flash of the old-time jealousy returned, and he felt anything but comfortable as he reflected how intimately these two must have been brought together while making all these arrangements. He knew how easy it was for Kyte to play the ardent lover, even when the pretext was far less fair than in this case. He knew that Marcia was partial to flirtation; he remembered how willingly the little witch had accepted the attentions of the elegant, sleepy-eyed sport on that unlucky occasion when chance dropped Kyte Darley at Paullets Landing. And remembering all this, he wondered just how much pleasure and flirtation there had been mixed with the business during those days which intervened between his parting with and meeting Kyte Darley?

The gambler was as shrewd-witted as he was keen of sight, despite his habitually lazy, indolent demeanor, and through his half-closed lids he saw the frown and readily divined what was troubling his companion.

At any other time, he would have taken pleasure in fanning this jealous flame, but now he was rather anxious to smother it. So much depended on the work of this surly fellow, and he knew from past experience that Rufus Cramp could only do clean, thorough work when his brain was clear, his nerves untangled.

"But under it all, old fellow, there was a con-

stant harping on one Rufus Cramp, and how delicious would be the life with him in the future, when neither you nor she would have a care save how to spend your share of those precious millions. Really, Rufe," with a soft little laugh, "it was not half as delightful as on that first visit of mine. Then you were near to be made jealous, and the little witch could afford to waste a few of her smiles on yours truly. But now—" and a shrug of the shoulders completed the work he wished.

Rufus Cramp was quite as easily elated as he was depressed, and not even this rather thick coating was sufficient to gag him. He felt that Marcia was still his own, and it was with a much more hopeful tone that he spoke next:

"After all, it's a prize well worth playing boldly for, and I'll do my level best to carry it off smoothly. Of course you will—"

Just at that moment, distinctly audible even through the dull, monotonous throbbing of the vessel under the impulse of the heavy machinery, the two schemers heard the creaking of a hinge and the snapping of a lock, coming from the adjoining state-room. There had been no preceding sound of footsteps, nothing to tell of a door being opened or the state-room being entered.

Kyte leaned forward and tapped Rufus on the lips, his eyes glowing and his whole face filled with strong suspicion.

"Who has that state-room?" he muttered, guardedly.

"Mark Landrum!" breathed Cramp, in the same low tones.

Even as he uttered the name, there came a low, musical whistle to their ears from the next room, accompanied by a shuffling, dragging sound. Strained as their ears were, they caught the clear click of a key in a lock, as though a trunk or a valise was being opened.

"He won't step more than a minute or two," muttered Cramp, only to have those white fingers again placed over his lips.

Kyte Darley was not one to throw away a chance knowingly, and though there was hardly cause for suspecting the stranger, who occasionally used the voice of the Duke of Derringers, he felt uneasy. The game they were playing was so dangerous, the stakes so large, that this was no more than a natural feeling. And, really, the fellow had been remarkably pertinacious while on deck.

In silence they sat and waited, listening intently to what they could hear.

To one fresh from the silence of the land, unaccustomed to the steady thump-jar of the machinery, mingling with the puffing of steam and the rumble of the paddle-wheels, nothing would have been audible; but the schemers could hear that soft, low whistle, broken by brief pauses. They knew that Mark Landrum was searching for something in his trunk or valise. They heard him close the receptacle and turn the key in the lock. They were aware of his standing up, of his washing his hands and combing his hair. And then they heard him open the door, shutting it again and turning the key in the lock.

"He's gone!" uttered Cramp, with a breath of relief, he could hardly have explained just why.

"And he'll not get rich over what he heard from us," said Kyte, with a frown. "It might have been different but for that creaking hinge. I wonder if that creak startled him into letting the catch snap back in the lock?"

"What! you don't think the rascal was trying to play spy?" indignantly ejaculated Rufus.

"If I knew just what and who the fellow was, I could tell better," muttered Darley, his brows contracting afresh. "It looked like premeditation, his sticking so closely to us, up yonder. And then—I can't so easily get over that infernal voice!"

"You don't think—bah!" with a little laugh at the ridiculous supposition. "It can't be The Duke!"

"I don't say it is. I don't think it could possibly be him. I've seen him too often to be fooled, while you—well," with a touch of malicious satire, "if you fail to recognize him, after your experience with the Duke of Derringers, I hardly think it's of any use trying to make one out of the couple!"

"I've evened up with the devil, anyhow!" snarled Rufus, showing his teeth. "He took me by surprise that time, and while I was drunk. I took him into camp, though, when his eyes were wide open. I gave him a sore head, if no worse, and if he was able to follow me on his own legs, he sure Martin Tullar took him in out of the wet!"

"Martin's got a mighty sure grip, they say, but Barringer is harder to hold than a wet eel. It may be that The Duke gave him the slip, and means to see the game out. If so—this Mark Landrum may be he, in disguise. Shears and a razor, helped out by a little dye and a change of voice, would make all the difference we saw in this fellow!"

Rufus Cramp turned fairly ghastly at this suggestion.

"You don't think that, Darley?" he muttered, brushing one trembling hand across his damp brow.

"I don't say I believe it. I only say that it might be so."

"Then the jig's up!" with a savage oath. "We might as well turn it up, before we run our necks into a noose!"

"Turn him down, rather," laughed Kyte, banishing all care from his handsome face. "And when I reverse a card of that suit, it never sees the light of day again. Drop him out of your mind, old fellow. Let him be Mark Landrum, Duke Barringer or the foul fiend himself, he shall not chip into this game of ours. I'll make sure of so much."

"After all, we're setting up a man of straw, I feel certain, now I take a second look at it. I couldn't be so completely deceived. I hate the demon too intensely for that. He's only Mark Landrum, and what has excited our suspicions against him may only come of chance, or else caused by his thinking to rope us in at some of his pet games. Don't you fancy so?"

"It does begin to have that complexion," laughed Kyte. "Still, it can do no harm to be on the safe side, and I flatter myself that when I once set to work, it won't take very many minutes for me to get at the bottom facts. If he is Duke Barringer, he'll stop over before reaching his original destination. If he's Mark Landrum, and has any particular game that he wants to foster, maybe I can learn him something new. Even with all those millions in view, it won't do to neglect smaller crops."

"Then we'll postpone our game?"

"Not for a moment longer than it takes to carry it out smoothly," positively returned Darley, his eyes glowing. "I tell you it has to be finished this very night!"

"But there are other chances, you said?"

"And so there are, but for all that we'll not take them if the one that first offers can be improved as it should be. Remember, it may fail us, even while we are trying to do our level best."

"Have it your own way, man," growled Rufus, sulkily. "I'm as anxious as you can be to have it over with. Bad as it is, it's a thousand-fold worse, this waiting and brooding over it!"

"Look you here, old fellow," deliberately uttered Kyte Darley, bending forward and tapping his fellow-schemer on the arm, holding his eyes with a luminous gaze that seemed to penetrate his very brain. "I give you free warning that you've got to brace up and be a man. I tell you frankly that I'll hold you responsible if anything goes wrong through your failing nerve. I'm in this game to stay, and if you lose me my share of the stakes, I'll slit your throat the next moment!"

"Keep your threats to yourself, Kyte Darley!"

"I will, after this warning. I want you to see that you can't afford to break down when the pinch comes."

"Wait until I do fail, won't you?"

"It will be too late to warn you then," with a short, hard laugh. "After all, there is not so much for you to do. You should be anxious to be at it, remembering the glorious reward that awaits your success. Why, man alive! I'll take your place and thank you kindly into the bargain if you'll agree to give me your share!"

"If it would not be transferred?" with a little laugh.

"That's the sticking point," smiled Kyte, easing up now that he had produced the effect he desired. "I know it wouldn't be easy to transfer a certain portion of your reward, and that's why I'm telling you to brace up."

"I don't need it. I'm ready to play my part at once."

"That's hearty. But there's no immediate rush, after all. You can take your usual constitutional on deck, just as soon as you like. Only, keep an eye out for the signal, and be ready to take advantage of it. You understand?"

"Perfectly," said Rufus Cramp, rising from the bunk and proceeding to leave his hands and face.

"By the way, how is Miss Wellspring taking matters?"

"Better than I expected. She keeps pretty close to her state-room, only going out for a little stroll on deck now and then."

"If the charming Marcia should get wind of it!" laughed Kyte.

"It has to be done, you know. I'm her father's confidential messenger, and since that unfortunate accident kept Aunt Honor from attending the poor girl, of course she has only me to look to for these little attentions. Still, there's little thought of lovemaking, on her side or on mine."

"She don't take it very hard, then?"

"She don't show it so much, now, but she has thoughts only for her father. She's a model heiress! One would think she would rather rejoice, if ever so secretly, over her coming freedom with millions!"

"May her freedom come right speedily!" laughed Kyte, opening the door and stepping aside for his comrade in sin to pass out before him. "And may we both be there to see!"

As Cramp brushed close to his shoulder, Darley muttered:

"Mind; she must go with you, if only for a few minutes. Once on deck, surely you can wag that tongue of yours nimbly enough to hold her in play until—well, you comprehend?"

"I'll do my level best. And you?"

"Will take a little walk to see if I can smoke that precious Mark Landrum of yours," was the prompt reply. "If he really is what he pretends to be, all well and good. If not—if he is D. B. in disguise—you'll hear something drop before next sun rises!"

They separated, Rufus Cramp passing briskly along the long cabin where the white-aproned negro waiters were rapidly removing the last traces of the recent meal, his destination the ladies' cabin, where he had already noted the door of Portia Wellspring's state-room, as usual closed. Just as he crossed the line which marks the two cabins, he cast a glance over his shoulder, to stop short with a hot curse grating betwixt his white teeth.

He saw Kyte Darley just entering the door of the state-room occupied by the sickly passenger, Wilfred Bangs.

Rufus Cramp turned sharply, taking a step in that direction, only to check himself the next instant.

CHAPTER XI.

RUFUS CRAMP MAKES AN APPOINTMENT.

"Is it there he's looking for Mark Landrum?" he muttered below his breath, as Kyte Darley vanished from sight. "If he shirks the rest as he has the beginning, a mighty small share of the millions ought to more than pay him for his work!"

This was not the first time that something similar had crossed his mind. Whenever he paused to glance over the desperate game they were playing, it ever seemed to him that not only was the most difficult portions of the play assigned him, but that nearly all the risk was run by him as well. If aught should go seriously wrong—if the startling truth should ever escape and an accounting be called for—there would be no escape for him. With all his care, he had not been able to hide his agency, to cover his trail.

"He could laugh in his sleeve and lay low for another chance—curse him!" inwardly fumed the schemer, as he reluctantly turned his face from the door of the state-room occupied by Wilfred Bangs. "If I was fool enough to grit my teeth and take the whole thing on my own shoulders, that is. And of course I will! I love that sleepy-eyed devil so passionately!"

The thought coming just then amused him so that he broke into an audible laugh, the sound of which caused him to start with a quick glance around him.

One of the negro waiters was grinning from ear to ear. Several of the women in the saloon were smiling blandly upon him, after the peculiar fashion of married ladies who are interested watchers of a love affair. So, at least, Rufus interpreted their bright glances, and a little flush tinged his sallow cheeks as two of the ladies put their heads together for a confidential whisper.

Thus recalled to his duty, the really handsome young fellow doffed his hat, and bowing to the company in general, was soon gently tapping at the door of the state-room occupied by Portia Wellspring.

The situation might have been a far pleasanter one. He felt that all eyes were upon him. If anything should happen—if anything should chance to go wrong with their plans—would it not be remembered that he had begged the heiress to go on deck?

Fortunately for him, he was not kept long in suspense. The door opened, and Portia Wellspring appeared before him, a faint, pallid smile answering his profound salute.

In that moment when the clear lights of the saloon fell fairly upon her features, such of the lady passengers as were within convenient range of the door, eagerly improved the opportunity to take a mental daguerreotype of the great heiress. For, somehow, the facts of the case had become general property.

Even then, though showing the effects of the heavy shock which the tidings brought by Rufus Cramp had given her, Portia Wellspring looked lovely and charming enough for even a million-heiress. And as this is the first chance we have had to see her fairly, a brief description of her personal appearance will not come amiss.

If anything, she was a trifle below the average height of her sex, but so gracefully formed, so perfectly rounded without being too plump, that when looking upon her, one never thought of drawing comparisons. She was what she was, and that seemed perfection.

Being neither blonde nor brunette, Portia was that especially delightful medium in which is combined the charms and advantages of both. Her hair was of a rich, deep brown, whose luster was only surpassed by that of her matchless eyes; large, liquid, now sad and tinged with a peculiar wistfulness, but which, on occasion, could dance with mischief or sparkle with spirit. Those who knew her best, said that Portia had a will of her own, and that it only required a proper opportunity for her to prove herself a

perfect heroine, such as books have been written about.

Certainly she possessed one of the modern requisites; she was what even a rival must have called beautiful. Her features were regular, without being at all insipid. Her complexion was perfect, for hers was a waxen white where the vast majority would have shown sallowness under the grief and anxiety which were constantly with her.

Her dress was plain, of some soft material, free from furbelows or "extras." She wore no jewelry, save a thin gold chain at her throat.

A moment she stood out in plain view of the curious ladies, then stepped back a pace where her pale face was shaded a little, though not with a motion that could be mistaken, even by an eager lover, as an invitation to cross the threshold. It was simply the shrinking of a true heart from outside sympathy.

Rufus Cramp apparently understood this, for his tone was low and respectful as he spoke:

"I had hoped to meet you at the table, this evening, Miss Wellspring, but as you failed to come, I—"

"I could not," with a little shiver as she cast a shy glance toward the curious passengers.

"I comprehend," with a grave frown, not at her, however. "In some incomprehensible manner the cause of your journey has reached their ears, and though few of them are really averse to good feeling, I fear they would be too deeply interested in watching what you did, and how you did it, to even think of eating!"

"It is one of the penalties one must pay for being so uncomfortably rich, I suppose," with a weary little sigh. "I often wish we were poor. Then—we would be together more!"

Skeptical though he was by birth and training, Rufus Cramp knew that Portia was not pretending in saying this. She was, just then, thoroughly disgusted with wealth and the penalties that attach to such.

"I would have sent you a note by the stewardess, only I know that a score of busybodies beset her every time she comes from your room hungry for the slightest crumb of information, and out of such a note they would immediately make a whole volume!"

Portia shrunk back a trifle, and perhaps unconsciously to herself, her voice and manner were just a thought more icy than before.

"You are very kind and thoughtful, but if such is the case, it would be better to starve than feed their curiosity. I need nothing. I am only praying for this boat to make all haste to my poor father!"

"Pardon me, Miss Wellspring," said Rufus, his voice grave, his manner solicitous. "You do need something, else I should not have taken this step in their faces. You are breaking down with silent brooding over this sad affair. You deny yourself fresh air and exercise. When you reach St. Louis, you will be an invalid instead of the strong, healthy nurse your father will need."

"I will be strong. I could not break down while he has need of me," was the earnest, yet simple response.

"I believe that you would hold out while he required nursing, but is that all? When he fully recovers, as recover I feel he will, do you think he will need you any the less?"

It was an unanswerable argument, and even before Portia replied, the cunning schemer felt assured his point was gained.

"It is rather close and stuffy in this little den, I must admit, since you press me so closely," and Portia glanced around her decidedly limited quarters with a faint smile.

"It is cool and pleasant on deck. There are a few passengers enjoying the air, but they will drop off gradually, and the stars give hardly light enough to afford even the most curious among them much satisfaction in staring at their famous—"

"Don't!" murmured Portia, shrinking a little, a pained look coming into her beautiful face. "If you only knew how I hate the very idea of riches, while he is so ill!"

"It was not riches I had in mind," bowed Rufus adroitly. "But I may expect you? You will give yourself an hour or so relief from this close confinement? It is for your father's sake as well as your own that I am so persistent."

"I will go on deck, since you think it best."

"It certainly is for the best. I will await you, then, as before. Otherwise, we would have two-thirds of yonder gapers following at our heels, patiently waiting for such crumbs as—"

"I will pass out onto the guards from my room."

Rufus Cramp accepted his dismissal, bowing gracefully, uttering a few words that might leave the impression that no further meeting was in view for that evening, if the listeners chose to so interpret them.

The smile faded from his face even before he crossed the grooves in which ran the curtained doors as a division between the cabins, and his blue eyes were sparkling with anything but good-nature as he paused before the door through which he had seen Kyte Darley vanish some minutes earlier. For a brief space he seemed to hesitate, his hand partly extended toward the knob, glancing along toward the gen-

tlemen's cabin, where already several parties were seated at cards.

In reality he was listening, hoping to catch—what?

Nothing came to his ears, and he grasped the knob, giving it a quick turn, only to feel a resistance that was readily interpreted. The door was locked.

Clinching his right hand far more tightly than is usually thought advisable for that purpose, Rufus Cramp rapped sharply on the panel. The door opened almost instantly, without the warning grate of a key in the wards, and the bright face of Kyte Darley confronted him.

"You, is it?" with a slight echo of surprise. "I took it for the nigger bringing supper. Why knock?"

"Was I to burst the door in?" snapped Cramp, his glittering eyes roving quickly over the gloomy space, lighted only from the cabin outside. "I did try the knob, but the door was locked."

"In your imagination, rather," laughed Darley, carelessly, turning partially toward the berth on which lay the sickly passenger, adding: "A good friend of mine, Mr. Bangs; Rufus Cramp, Wilfred Bangs."

The invalid was lying at length on the lower berth, a cloak carelessly flung over him, but at these words he partially lifted himself and extended a small, white hand toward Cramp, saying in a low, husky voice:

"Your servant, Mr. Cramp. Any friend of my friend—and a friend in need has Darley proven himself!—is heartily welcome. I would ask you to have a seat, but," and he glanced around the narrow apartment with a faint smile, "as you see, my present possessions are extremely limited."

"And still they come!" laughed Kyte, as another rap sounded at the door which he had closed behind Rufus. "Ah! it is you, Sambo!" he added, cheerfully, as a sable figure stood revealed, bearing a neatly-covered tray on which rested a rather substantial meal for a sick man.

Darley took in the tray, and then, with a laughing farewell, passed out of the state-room, linking arms with his comrade in crime.

"Well, and how goes it, Rufe?" he whispered, guardedly. "All serene? You have completed your arrangements, I trust?"

"You do your work one-half as promptly, and you wouldn't have near so much time to waste after that fashion," growled Cramp, with a short nod of his head toward the state-room they had just left.

"I'll keep up with the hounds, dear boy, never fret," lightly retorted Kyte, adding seriously: "Mind you, Rufe, the job must be done this night, if at all! Keep your eyes open, and the moment I give the signal, get down to business!"

"I'll do my part, as I told you before. Why keep dinging that warning into my ears? Why not take thought for your own share?"

"I have that down fine. I am sure of myself, but I can't be so certain about anybody else, you know," a little less brusquely. "When is she to meet you on deck?"

"There was no particular time set."

"Then you mustn't linger here. She might go, and not seeing you at hand, beat a retreat. Go up above at once. We can't afford to throw away the faintest chance in this game. You know that!"

"And you? Go back to your Mr. Bangs, I suppose?" snapped Rufus.

"Not right away," coolly. "I'm going to test the quality of your Mr. Landrum, first. If he rings true metal, all right. If he prove base counterfeit, as I half suspect—Well, the dukedom of Derringers will have to advertise for an heir!"

"Satan grant it!" fervently muttered Rufus Cramp, as he dropped the arm of his companion as they entered the office.

Kyte Darley smiled lightly as he heard those words, but if he could have known just what was then passing through the brain of the speaker, he might not have felt so wholly amused.

"Either way, it would turn up trumps for me," mentally decided Rufus Cramp, as he passed out of the office to the guards. "Duke Barringer or Kyte Darley—it is a toss-up which one I hate the worst!"

And so it was. There was no love lost between the two plotters. There was nothing of genuine liking or friendship in their alliance, even at first. Each one felt that the other could be made useful in a game for gold, but that was all.

After that fateful meeting with Marcia Wellspring, already hinted at, even the tie of mutual interest was barely strong enough to keep the two men from breaking into an open quarrel. Both were in love with the young woman, and each was resolved to win her for himself, though as yet Kyte Darley had kept this determination to himself. He would lay low until this Fight for Five Millions was won, then he would show his hand openly, let Rufus Cramp rage as he would. If he made too much trouble—well, there were more ways than one to silence such a cur!

Something of this also ran through the busy brain of Kyte Darley as he turned away from

Rufus Cramp at the door, but he had scant time in which to pursue the subject, for Mark Landrum stood in his path, smiling, bowing, gracefully waving one white hand.

"Do you know, my dear fellow, I've actually been searching all outdoors for you," he said, in that soft, purring voice which was his habitual tone, it seemed.

"And now that I am discovered?" smiled Kyte Darley.

"I trust that you will join me at the bar."

"I never drink," drawled the gambler.

"At least, have a cigar?"

"I never smoke," as coolly declared Darley, tossing aside the weed which he had but a few moments before ignited. "It's almost as bad for the nerves as drinking, and I pride myself on mine."

"Is that so?" murmured Landrum, his brows arching, a languid surprise in his tones. "Now I never decline an invitation either way, for such trifles never affect my nerves. Or, maybe, I haven't got any. What would you think?"

"I never think. It's too much trouble, and acting is so much more profitable," smiled Darley, his black eyes coolly, keenly scrutinizing the features of his companion, striving to settle his doubts one way or the other as to his being or not being the Duke of Derringers.

Although as yet he could not be positive, he was rather inclined to favor the idea. If a stranger—if simply Mark Landrum, surely he would have betrayed some annoyance at those repeated denials? Or if not positive anger, he would have taken them as a hint that his company or acquaintance was undesired just then.

"Do you find it so, always?" asked Landrum, placidly. "I can understand how that might be, where only pigeons flew; but there the hawks and other birds of prey also congregate, and sometimes one cannot be sure what species he is flying against."

"All's one to me, nevertheless," retorted Darley, with a careless smile, beneath which he was using his brains as earnestly as ever before in his life.

This Mark Landrum possessed all the coolness for which the Duke of Derringers was noted. He also had his figure, as near as may be. But his face proved the puzzle. If it could only be masked by a black beard for a single instant!

"Indeed!" ejaculated Landrum, his smile becoming a trifle more ghost-like, his tones growing a thought more earnest. "Then perhaps I have made a little mistake!"

"I never make mistakes," declared Kyte, sticking to his original line with a persistency that deserved more definite results.

"You are most fortunate, for a mistake is worse than a crime, in my estimation," gravely added Landrum, thoughtfully rubbing his smooth chin. "If not too much trouble, I would like your decision. Shall we sit down?"

"I never sit down," purred Kyte, smiling again.

"Do you ever play poker or brag?" abruptly asked Landrum.

Darley felt that his stereotyped answer would hardly fit this case, for he was determined to solve the mystery that confronted him. Still, he made his answer as stinging as well might be.

"When I find a match worth the trouble. Do you know of any such?"

Mark Landrum uttered a deep sigh of relief, grasping the hand of the gambler and gripping it cordially as he exclaimed:

"My dear fellow, how intensely you relieve me! I really began to look for another 'never'!"

"Possibly you may see cause to wish you had found it, before the end," dryly uttered Darley.

"It was actually beginning to daunt me—and of all things a bluff is the most disagreeable for me to swallow," laughed Landrum. "And I counted on a few hours' amusement with you—I did, really!"

"May I ask in just what shape you expected to find it?"

"Why not? I'd prefer that to another of those abominable nevers! And then, perhaps you can settle my doubts as to that little mistake of mine—provided it was a mistake."

Despite his own coolness, Kyte Darley was beginning to grow a little irritated. It was not often that he met his match in a fencing bout of this sort. It was a skill on which he had long prided himself, and an accomplishment that had well repaid the trouble of perfecting. It had carried him safely through more than one ugly scrape. It had more often refilled his empty pockets. Never until now had it utterly failed him when fully exercised.

"I can tell better when you put your doubts into words," he retorted, the sharpness of his voice bringing a smile into the dark eyes of his adversary, strengthening his resemblance to Duke Barringer.

"It is a mere trifle, I fear you will think," with an airy wave of one white hand. "But it troubles me, lest I have done an honest man injustice. You see, we were talking of you—"

"Why of me, in particular?" still more sharply.

"And a gentleman present chanced to say that you were the best hand at either poker or

brag that traveled the river," placidly added Landrum, as though no interruption had taken place.

"And you disputed it, of course?" sneered Kyte, his eyes aglow.

"Of course," in a matter-of-fact tone. "There can't well be two best at anything, and I carry the broom at both games."

"In your mind?" bowed Kyte, recovering himself.

"Such being the case, of course I took the liberty to doubt the gentleman's assertion, at which he chose to grow a little excited and to repeat his words, adding that the proof of the pudding was in the eating; in less classical phrase, he declared that he had money to back his opinion, bidding me put up or shut up, and to produce my champion forthwith. I modestly indicated myself, when he actually laughed at me. What I am in doubt about is this: first, I took his manner as an insult."

"And come to me to advise as to how you can swallow it with the least degree of choking?" sneered Kyte Darley.

"As such I answered it, by gently laying my fingers across his lips," was the placid addition.

"When he knocked you down, of course?"

"When he declared that he would have my heart's blood, and persisted, even after I hinted that it would, perhaps, be more satisfactory to the gentlemen who looked on, if this question of supremacy with the cards was first determined."

"When he intimated that you feared less for your money than you did for your life?" questioned Kyte, still hoping to bring a flush of anger to those cool, pale cheeks.

If not the Duke of Derringers, this man certainly possessed an equal nerve and coolness. Kyte Darley was learning to hate him most cordially, and in that hatred to lose sight of the dangerous game he was playing with Rufus Cramp for a partner.

"Second," added Landrum, still in that smooth, even tone that showed not the faintest trace of annoyance at these repeated thrusts, "if you are really my superior at either game—which I am more than anxious to put to the test in the most thorough manner—I made—"

A rapid footfall caused them to turn, and a well-dressed, middle-aged man paused before them, his face alternately flushing and paling as he bowed to Landrum, hastily uttering:

"I am sorry—it was a blunder of mine—I didn't know who you were when I uttered those words, a bit ago, or I wouldn't—"

"Do you know me now?" coldly interjected Landrum, his face impassible, his voice hard and metallic, in startling contrast with his tones while speaking with Kyte Darley just before.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE HURRICANE DECK.

RUFUS CRAMP reached the hurricane deck in good time, with something to spare. A swift, comprehensive glance assured him that Portia Wellspring had not as yet made her appearance, and with a deliberate step that but poorly corresponded with the tumult of fears, doubts and evil hopes that raged within, he paced back and forth near the point where the heiress must first make her appearance.

For days he had been preparing himself for this very hour. Scores of times he had gone through it all in imagination, familiarizing himself with each move, each little part that was to be combined into a harmonious whole, until he told himself that he could not possibly fail, no matter what unexpected difficulties might arise in the path. Yet now, when everything seemed working smoothly, just as the evil schemers would wish, his nerves began to quiver and his heart to fail him. There seemed something hanging over their heads, trembling on the point of falling, all the more frightful from its very vagueness.

If she failed to come? Women are proverbially fickle, and prone to change their minds. The slightest trifle might influence her. And Kyte swore that it must be done that very night, if done at all. If not done—what then? Would they ever have another chance at the Wellspring millions?

What would Marcia say? Would she look at the matter in a clear light, placing their defeat where it justly belonged, on the broad shoulders of chance, or would she blame him? The last, if aught that sleepy-eyed scoundrel of a Kyte Darley could hint or insinuate would affect her! Or, supposing Portia should come, as agreed upon; take it for granted that all should go smoothly until the very last act; then if there was a mistake! If there should be any awkward hitch or catch!

What would be the end?

Rufus Cramp shivered as though a cold flail had struck him without warning, and one hand rose to finger his throbbing throat. For a single instant he could have taken oath that a hempen noose was tightly drawn about his neck!

It was well for the schemers that just then Portia Wellspring raised her head above the level of the deck, uttering a little sound of relief that at once attracted the attention of the shivering plotter.

Rufus Cramp sprang forward to assist her,

and the touch of her warm hand upon his worked like magic. All trembling and doubt vanished from body and mind, and he was once more the cold, heartless, unscrupulous plotter who sought only the shortest, surest way to the goal.

"Now that you are really here, Miss Wellspring," he said, softly, as he drew her hand through his arm and slowly paced toward the stern of the boat, "I begin to tremble at my audacity."

He felt her shrink ever so slightly from his side, and the ghost of a smile flitted across his pale face as he hastened to add:

"Yet it was a duty I owed your father, fully as much as to you. He would give me scant thanks were I to bring him an invalid instead of the charming nurse of whom, in his loneliness, he used to draw such delightful pictures! Not actually, you know," with a little laugh, "but in imagination. He would see you in almost everything, and one time as my father heard him sighing heavily, he was almost paralyzed by the answer he received. Just think of it, if you can! Father is old, barefooted on top of the head, wrinkled, sallow, sunken-cheeked and snuffy-nosed. But I forget; you have seen him?"

"What was it poor father said?" nodding assent to the question.

"That he had been trying to change father into Portia, but in vain. The clothes wouldn't fit. Even a lace cap wouldn't hide that bald spot, nor could all his imagination change that wrinkled, crab-apple visage into the smooth—into the face of his darling!" laughed Cramp.

He was trying the best he knew to put Portia wholly at her ease. He congratulated himself on his ready invention, but instead of the laugh he expected, he caught a faint sob, felt the little hand resting on his arm tremble anew. Evidently he had made another mistake.

His own laugh was checked so abruptly that even in her grief Portia could not wholly overlook the change. There were tears in her eyes as she glanced up into his pale face, and it was only with an effort that she succeeded in uttering:

"It must have shocked your father, but I cannot laugh as I might at another time. I can see only the great loneliness, the heart-sick longing for the one who best loves him on earth! If I was only with him now! If I could annihilate the miles that still stretch out between us, I would sacrifice ten years of my life!"

"The time will soon pass, the miles rapidly grow less," soothingly uttered Rufus, for the instant really feeling something akin to sympathy. "The Superb is trying her best to act in accordance with her name, and that best is much better than common. Really, we will be at our journey's end, almost before we realize it!"

"To find—what?"

Low, despairing, almost in a wail came these words. Not to her companion, but more as though she was questioning the bright stars that gleamed and twinkled overhead.

"A convalescent, not an invalid," quickly said Cramp, taking the answer upon himself.

Portia paused abruptly, partially turning until they stood face to face for a brief space, during which her glorious eyes seemed trying to read his inmost thoughts.

"Do those words come simply from your lips, or from your heart?" she asked, almost passionately. "Do you speak thus only to cheer my sinking courage? If so, it is a cruel kindness! The shock will fall all the more heavily in the end!"

It was no easy task to meet that earnest gaze without flinching, feeling as he did that this poor girl would never more meet her father in life, but Rufus Cramp proved equal to the task. With seeming frankness he met her eye to eye, a grave smile lighting up his handsome face.

"I'll not claim more honor than is justly my dues, Miss Wellspring. If necessary I would even lie to you, if telling the plain truth would be to your injury. But in this case there is not the slightest need of so doing. Your father will get well. If not—if there had been any change for the worse—I would surely have been notified. Not only my father, but the physician attending on your father, pledged me their words to that effect. Neither have telegraphed, and that fact should be sufficient to assure you that all is going well with your father."

"I am praying so! The prayer is never out of my mind," murmured Portia, as they resumed their slow promenade.

"That can do no harm, and may work much good," softly uttered the schemer, almost involuntarily going back in thought to the days when he felt himself madly in love with this charming creature. "I think such a prayer, from your lips would soften even Death himself."

"Do not utter that terrible word!" shivered Portia. "It chills my very heart, and brings back the dark forebodings I try to banish."

Rufus pressed the little hand still closer to his side. It was remarkable how distinct the past was growing! Such daring hopes as he had entertained, in those days! If they had come to pass! If that cursed day had never dawned on either of them!

The thought brought the Duke of Derringers

to mind, and naturally followed those vague yet haunting doubts of Mark Landrum. Was he really that demon, in disguise? Would Kyte Darley unmask him, as he boasted? And if he should make the attempt, how would it end? Would Kyte prove the victor? If not—what would become of their plot?

He could hardly be expected to carry it out alone and single-handed, even if he knew just what sort of a signal to look for. Kyte had been so infernally close-mouthed. Afraid, possibly, of having the lead taken from him. And so, if aught should happen to him to prevent him from playing the part allotted—or self-elected, rather—to him, what would be the result?

"It would serve the dog just right if I were to back out of it!" he mentally declared. "Why not? She was fond enough of me in those days! I have seemed her whole dependence, of late! It might be!"

He glanced down at the charming face so close to his shoulder, now partially revealed by the starlight, though the fleecy veil she wore was sufficient to ward off any curious glances which the few promenaders of the deck might cast toward her. It was charming. All the more so for its pallor and the touching sadness to be seen there. If Marcia only had her sweet disposition! Or if Marcia only had Portia's fortune!

The curious temptation was steadily growing stronger. Curious when contrasted with the purpose which brought them together that evening. And, after all, even if naught should come of it, would it not be as well to pass the time thus as after another fashion?

Rapidly all this passed through his busy brain, and the silence had not lasted long enough to render his next words unconnected.

"Death is indeed a cold and chilling word, but it is not always unaccompanied by hope. If one has lived a correct life, there is still the hope of a reunion hereafter. It is not difficult to picture a parting much more bitter than that: one where both still walk the earth!"

Rufus cast a covert glance into her face as he spoke these words, into which he strove to throw a subtle, yet apparent meaning. There was no reply. Portia was gazing straight ahead down the river, only the diverging, tumbling waves stirred up by the paddle-wheels showing in the starlight. Curious shapes were to be fancied there, as the curling crests broke into bubbles and foam, with all around them darkness. Was she watching these alone, or was that a conscious blush that came into her face?

Rufus was not sure, and he dared not attempt a closer scrutiny. At all events, she was not openly alarmed as yet, and it might be as well to pursue his experiment a little further.

"I can recall one such parting with heart-sickening distinctness," he added, his voice low, sad and despondent. "It was all the fault of the man. He yielded to silly temptation, and, in his wretchedness, he drank more than his brain could carry. Like many another poor wretch, that one excess proved fatal to his dearest hopes. While his poor brain was maddened and upset, he met the woman who was the unconscious cause of all this, and—"

"Is it wise or even friendly to recall all this, Mr. Cramp?" interposed Portia, her voice very clear, very cold.

Rufus was startled. She had seemed so unconscious of his meaning, so wholly absorbed in watching the waves, that this sudden repulse cast him completely off his balance.

For the moment he forgot his evil plots, forgot Marcia Wellspring, forgot everything save that this was the first woman whom he had really loved. He had never been given a chance to try and explain away that miserable mistake. He felt that he must do so now.

"It may not be wise in the condemned criminal to seek another trial, but is he to be blamed for clinging to even the ghost of a chance?" he hurriedly muttered, his face agitated, his eyes glowing.

"If his guilt be without even that ghost of an excuse, should he not suffer the penalty?"

"Have I not suffered? Ay! suffered all the tortures of the damned?"

For the moment Rufus Cramp believed he was speaking no more than the simple truth. He had forgotten his plots, forgotten Marcia, forgotten all save his old-time love for this beautiful girl-woman.

"The past is dead," gravely uttered Portia. "Why try to resurrect it, when only pain and disappointment can follow the rash attempt?"

"If nothing else, I can at least partially clear myself. I was mad with drink that day, and—"

"I have long since forgiven, but I can never forget," was the cold, even interposition. "It is cruel in you to bring that sad day forward now, just when I am most dependent on you. It is as though you demanded a reward for your kindness."

Rufus Cramp flushed hotly at this. He was still manly enough to feel a certain sense of shame. But he was doggedly in earnest, and not to be rebuffed so readily.

"You are unjust, but so you have ever been since that black day! You forget all that went before, and date everything from that. You

accept that as my true form, and by it you measure all I say or do!"

"It is time I returned to my room. Good-night, Mr. Cramp," coldly said Portia, trying to free her hand from his arm.

Instead of yielding, he caught her hand with his left, holding it firmly as he rapidly spoke:

"I must beg of you to hear me out, Portia. It is a right I have won—a right granted me by no less than your own father!"

It was a brilliant thought, and he lost no time in spreading it before her dazzled eyes.

"My father!" echoed Portia, bewilderedly.

She recalled how terribly angry Romulus Wellspring had been when he read of that affair, as floridly detailed in the prints of the day. She remembered how he vowed to never rest until he had hunted the villain down to duplicate his caning, and how long she had to coax before that hot anger grew cool. And now—but it must be a mistake!

"Your father," coolly repeated Rufus, a little smile lighting up his face. "Greatly as I have suffered while underlying your displeasure, and much as I have wished to at least partially clear myself in your eyes, I would not have dared to speak so openly only for what your father said when he bade me hasten to bring you to his bedside."

"What he said—I don't understand you!" murmured Portia, still more bewildered, pressing one white hand to her temples.

"Your father called me to his side, as I told you," glibly lied the villain, wholly absorbed in this new issue. "He said that, apart from father, whom he could not spare just then, I was the only man in whom he could either trust or confide. He said that he knew I had been very foolish—that I had acted like an idiot on that occasion. He had been very wroth at first, but after quietly investigating the matter, he reached the conclusion that I had not sinned through an evil nature, but more through a brief insanity."

"Let it pass," hastily interposed Portia, again trying to free her hand, only ceasing lest her struggles should attract attention from the solitary passenger who stood near the center of the vessel. "I am glad if he forgave you. I did that long ago. Let me go, please!"

"In one moment," was the hurried response. "I must beg of you to hear me out."

"Very well. I will do so, on one condition," coldly said Portia.

"And that condition?"

"That you release my hand."

"You will hear all I have to say, then? You will not run away?"

"I will listen to all you care to say, but I warn you in advance that you are losing time and breath. I have forgiven you that day, but I can never forget it."

"Yes, before that, you were not so hard. You would even—"

"What I was then I will never be again. You were to repeat the words of my father, I believe. I am waiting, sir."

Ice could not have been colder, and in that moment the scales fell forever from the man's eyes. He was startled by the mere thought of what he had risked. Had this terrible strain on his brain weakened it so greatly?

He cast a swift glance around them. The last passenger had now left the deck, leaving them the only occupants of the hurricane-deck. The pilot-house was only dimly visible from where they stood, and only from being cast into relief against the sky, the pilot could not have been distinguished at all. Even were he to look in their direction he could have seen nothing.

If Kyte Darley would only come! If that cursed signal would only show itself!

Could he detain Portia long enough, after this? He could not use actual force, yet she must not escape before the signal came! It would force them to change all their plans, and again he cursed himself deep down in his throat for acting so idiotically.

"You were saying?" insisted Portia, impatient at the delay.

Something urged her to break her promise and flee from this man, but she remembered how he had served her, and hesitated. If he would only speak out and thus free her! It would be long ere she trusted him with another such opportunity.

"Your father was far more kind than I have found you," said Cramp, fighting against time. "He frankly told me that I had sinned, but he as frankly declared his belief that I had also suffered enough to cancel that thoughtless crime. He said that he had been thinking much and soberly since taken ill. Of course his thoughts were principally of you, and what would become of you were he to be taken away."

"Pray don't!" murmured Portia, with a shiver.

"I must tell you just what led to the end, else it may seem improbable to you," calmly added Rufus, glancing around once more in quest of Kyte Darley. "I am sorry if it pains you. I will be brief as I can."

"He said that without his presence to guard you from them, needy fortune-hunters would surround you at all times. He knew that you must marry some day, and if he could know that

your future was secured, death would be robbed of half its terrors to him.

"He said that he had long denied the distant relationship between our families, but that, after all, blood was thicker than water. He knew that I had loved you for years. I was not precisely the man he could wish, were the choice left entirely to him, but that it might easily be far worse. In short, your father told me, before witnesses, who will be ready to testify to the fact, that he hoped and prayed that you would consent to bury the past forever. That his last prayer was for you to marry me," hurriedly concluded the base schemer.

Even as he spoke his gaze was anxiously wandering about them, and he caught sight of a shadowy figure which he felt confident was that of Kyte Darley. If worst came to the worst—if the signal should be too long delayed—he would summon his ally to the spot, and then—

"I have heard you out with what patience I could summon, Mr. Cramp," coldly said Portia, drawing her figure erect. "I will believe all this when my father repeats it, not before. Good-night, sir."

Rufus Cramp made an urgent sign toward the shadow.

CHAPTER XIII.

MARK LANDRUM IN QUEST OF AMUSEMENT.

THERE was nothing soft or purring about Mark Landrum now, as he faced the middle-aged passenger; just the contrary. He seemed hard as flint, cold as ice, his face a mask of marble, though there was a peculiar reddish light glowing in his large black eyes. As he uttered that sharp query, the red lips parted a little from his white teeth, not in a smile, but with an expression that would have seemed more fitting in a tiger.

Thomas Burgess, though rather domineering with those whose caliber he felt beneath his own grade, rather given to blustering and making a weighty pocketbook take the place of more elaborate argument, shrunk a little from that impressive front, his florid face paling still more, his usually glib tongue seeming to thicken and grow clumsy.

"I didn't—I don't—if I had even suspected, you know—"

Blazing though those black eyes were, they seemed to freeze him, sending cold chills racing up and down his spinal column after the most uncomfortable fashion. And freezing though he could have taken oath he was, his brow was so damp that he began mopping it up with a huge bandana, under cover of which he cast an appealing glance around as though in search of help.

It so chanced that they three only occupied the office at that moment, the captain having ascended to the pilot house for a little while, the clerk and the barkeeper also being absent, possibly eating their supper.

There were curious eyes upon them, however, from among those of the passengers who were gathered around the card tables preparatory to opening their customary evening games. And some of the more interested were drawing nearer, as though eager to hear as well as see.

With a curious little smile upon his lips, Kyte Darley watched the face of the man whom he was becoming every moment more sure must be the notorious Duke of Derringers.

"You don't know?" said Mark Landrum, with that same icy sharpness, catching and holding the gaze of the intruder. "Well, you shall never again have to plead ignorance on this point as an excuse for your insolence. Lend me your ears for a few moments, please?"

"Certainly—anything—glad to accommodate you," stammered the unhappy Burgess, scarce knowing what words they were that passed his feverishly dry lips.

"My name is Mark Landrum," deliberately added the black-eyed sport. "I hail last from New York, where I have every reason to believe I was originally brought into the world. If you cannot get along without positive proof, I will send for persons and papers to gratify your utmost doubts."

"No need, I assure you," muttered Burgess, mopping more vigorously than ever, even while he felt as though a cataract of ice-water was rushing down his backbone. "Your bare word is more than enough."

"You are kind to say so, but I must insist on reading my title clear, once for all," bowed Mark Landrum, paying no attention to the few passengers who had by this time entered the office, watching and listening curiously. "It would be a thousand pities to send you out of the world without first convincing you that it comes through the hand and skill of a master."

"But, blame it all, my dear sir!" gasped Burgess, most uncomfortable in looks as in spirit. "It was all a mistake! I didn't know who you were when I spoke, or I wouldn't—"

"You never will know, unless you permit me to explain," coldly retorted the other. "Pray oblige me by holding your tongue until I finish what I began, will you?"

There was a low ripple of laughter among those who were looking on, but poor Burgess

felt in anything but a laughing mood. And Kyte Darley, too, was more sober than was his wont, as through his half-closed lids he keenly watched the face of Mark Landrum.

Was he what he claimed, or was he the Duke of Derringers? Had his life depended on his rightly answering this question, Kyte Darley felt that he would have to "go it blind."

"My name is Mark Landrum. I am a gentleman of leisure, and a thorough man of the world, traveling partly for amusement, partly in hopes of finding fresh champions to conquer. There are three things on which I pride myself; my good looks, my marksmanship, my skill at any and all games of cards where blind chance is not the sole factor. On the first item, my natural modesty forbids further dwelling, but as to the others: I have a healthy roll of good money that gently whispers the man does not draw the breath of life who is my equal, much less my superior."

"This is precisely why I ventured to chip in when I heard you cracking a second-rater—begging your pardon, sir, for the term," he smiled, softly, turning toward Kyte Darley, then finishing the sentence—"up to the skies as champion card-flipper on this great river."

"Finish him first; I can wait," purred Kyte, blandly.

"Unfortunately, I can't do that, off-hand," laughed Landrum, turning squarely upon Darley, greatly to the relief of Burgess, who lost no time in slinking away from that icy gaze. "I have promised him a chance to lose his good money first."

"You seem to forget that he has at least an equal chance to win some of yours," laughed Darley.

Mark Landrum shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Do you call that a chance, even? It is so dim and shadowy that I really did not recognize it. I only hope the poor devil was not in his cups when he dared me to match his champion. It would be a bitter disappointment to me, after so long a search for one of the men you read about, but never meet save in imagination! Do you really think there is a hope of my getting such a choice bit of pie?"

"I never think," responded Darley, falling back on his old tactics.

"You see," confidentially added Mark Landrum, taking the sleepy-eyed sport by the button-hole, apparently wholly oblivious to the fact that a score or more of passengers were curiously watching and listening. "It is not gold alone that urges me on. I've got enough of that precious commodity to last my time, and after me the deluge!"

"No young champions in training, to pick up the withered laurels which drop from your crown? How sad!" purred Kyte, his large eyes uprolling in affected sympathy.

"Is it not?" earnestly echoed Mark Landrum, adding more cheerfully: "But all the more reason why I should enjoy myself while the sun continues to shine. I just yearn for the fray, where pasteboard falls like snowflakes, and there is more honor to be won than an ordinary man could carry off in a four-horse wagon! I pant to sweep this mighty river with my little broom even as I have swept the land and the sea."

"But don't mistake me. I'm not partial to pigeons. I served my apprenticeship on them, until the insipid fare cloyed me, merely to give it a passing thought, now I am fully fledged. It is the hawks and vultures I am gunning for, and the very height of my ambition is to join issues with a kite!"

There was an emphasis on the last word that could not be either ignored or mistaken. There was a little humming sound among the lookers-on, and Darley knew that all eyes were turned curiously toward him, awaiting his answer.

"My first name is Kyte," he said, simply.

"Indeed!" ejaculated Landrum, his black eyes flashing with what seemed actual joy as he leaned forward to add: "Say that your last name is Darley, and my tub of joy will only lack one little addition to slop all over the premises."

"My last name is Darley," as calmly added that gentleman.

"And you are the champion of whom this gentleman with the red face and bulbous nose—Melted away, and never left a grease-spot behind by way of farewell!" ejaculated Landrum, elevating his brows as he glanced vainly around in quest of Burgess.

"Gone to rub up his pistols, I reckon," laughed one of the others.

"Perhaps you had better go help him," coldly retorted Landrum, with a stare that would have been insolent had it not been so stately. "The practice may stand you in good stead."

"I never indulge, thank you," frankly laughed the gentleman.

"Evidently a distant relative of yours, dear fellow," smiled Mark, as he turned once more toward Kyte Darley, who was still pursuing his studies, yet no whit nearer a decision than he had been at the outset.

And yet, if not the Duke of Derringers, why was he so persistent? Surely it was not simply because he wished to measure prowess over the card-table? It looked more like a deliberate attempt to force him into a quarrel. If Duke

Barringer, that was natural enough, since he must know that he, Kyte Darley, was working in co-operation with Rufus Cramp.

"I never had a relative," he mechanically replied, still with his sleepy eyes riveted upon that pale, handsome face.

"But you are the same Kyte Darley of whom our departed friend spoke?" persisted Landrum, nothing disconcerted by that unvarying gaze, the nature of which would have irritated if not unnerved the vast majority of men. "You are one of the card-champions of whom rumor speaks in trumpet tones. You are ready to make his boast good?"

"I never play cards," slowly uttered Darley, adding briskly: "with any one under the rank of a duke!"

He purposely emphasized the title, his eyes wide open now, searching for any change, however slight, that might confirm his suspicions.

But he could detect nothing of the sort. If indeed the Duke of Derringers, his adversary was thoroughly on his guard.

Mark Landrum laughed softly, slightly rubbing his hands together as a man sometimes does when thoroughly pleased with the situation.

"Do you know, you actually frightened me, at first," he purred, as smoothly as ever Kyte Darley could. "I feared you were going to flatly decline to pick up my gauntlet but now—"

"Then you are a duke?" interposed Darley.

"I am better; I am King-pin," gravely bowed Landrum.

Despite himself Kyte was forced to laugh at the supreme insolence which was so neatly disguised and sugar-coated.

"Then I will try to accommodate you, shortly," he said, with more of earnestness in his tones than he had thus far betrayed. "If I fail to amuse you, please remember that it was not I that uttered a brag."

"Every minute will seem an hour until the table is between us and the leaves of the common prayer book are fluttering back and forth," earnestly uttered Landrum. "You will pardon my impatience? I have not met a real champion for an entire month!"

"I beg your pardon?" muttered Darley, with an affected start. "I really failed to catch your words. I was thinking—wondering just how you would look if you wore a beard, black as your hair, long and slightly forked in the middle."

"I never wear a beard," calmly retorted Landrum.

"And with your hair long, curling a little as it reaches your shoulders," muttered Darley, his eyes seeming to grow more and more sleepy as he gazed into that cold, handsome face.

"I never wear hair," echoed Landrum, grave and dead.

"With hair and beard like that—instead of one cropped short and the other shaven off—I could name your caliber to a dot; say that of a derringer!"

It was his last shot, and Kyte's eyes opened widely as he looked for the result. It was disappointing in the extreme.

Those jetty eyebrows arched a little, but that was the only alteration visible as Mark responded:

"If it is a conundrum, I give it up! If it is a roundabout method of intimating that I am something of a bore, fewer words would have answered the purpose, and not a whit more harm done. I am a bore. Such a bore that I never yet knew a gentleman to sit across the table with me for a *vis-a-vis*, that, sooner or later, he did not arise in utter disgust. Need I say just why?" with a sweet smile.

Kyte Darley flushed hotly despite his vaunted nerve. For once he felt that he had met his match—even then he would not admit his inferiority—and that it would be time wasted in further trying to unmask this cool adversary. Nor did the smiles on the faces of those who gathered around them, lessen the sting.

"I think it would be more amusing to discover that for myself," he said lightly, taking a step toward the door. "If you will have patience for a few minutes, perhaps we can lock horns at your favorite sport. All are the same to me."

"The sooner the better, my dear fellow," bowed Landrum.

"I never rush things," said Darley, pausing with his hand on the knob, a peculiar smile lighting up his dark face. "I am a true gambler, in that I never travel without my private fetish. I never met with success if I entered a fight without first consulting the oracle. I am going now to pay my duty. If you are not above such weaknesses, perhaps it will be just as well for you to do the same."

"I never have weaknesses," smiled Landrum.

"There is always a beginning; this will begin in your pocket," grimly laughed Darley, as he turned and passed down the cabin to the state-room occupied by him in common with Rufus Cramp.

He cast a swift glance over his shoulder as he paused to turn the key in the lock. Mark Landrum was visible, apparently chatting good-naturedly with the interested passengers.

"He can't slip away from them, even were he

to try!" muttered Kyte Darley with a hard smile as he entered the room and locked the door behind him. "And now—for business! It must be about time."

Apparently the business alluded to did not require any external light, for his first movement was to close the transom and drop the thick curtain over it. He hung his handkerchief over the knob of the door, thus screening the keyhole. Then he stooped over his carpet-bag.

Mark Landrum was chatting easily with the interested passengers, just as Kyte Darley saw him, but not for long after that worthy vanished from view to consult his "fetich." Possibly Mark Landrum also had his little pet superstitions, if not actually a fetish. Possibly he felt that his brain would be all the clearer and better prepared for maintaining his title of King-pin if he could obtain a few whiffs of the cool night air.

However this may be, he quickly left the bar where his money was paying for free drinks, simply saying that he would be back shortly, when he trusted they would receive their share of amusement.

No one made any move toward following or accompanying him. In that brief period Mark Landrum had plainly made his mark on those who saw and listened. If not actually the Duke of Derringers in disguise—and there were more than one present who entertained quite as strong suspicions on this point as those Kyte Darley had tried so assiduously to satisfy—he was hardly a man who might be intruded upon when he evidently desired his own company alone.

As though he had a faint suspicion that some among the company might let curiosity get the better of their politeness, Mark Landrum paused for a few moments where the shadows effectually screened him from view, glancing keenly back. Then, satisfied that no one chose to risk playing the spy upon him, he moved silently along the narrow space between the guards and the outer ends of the various state-rooms, his keen eyes keeping tally of the latticed doors as he passed along. He paused finally at one which opened without a sound to his cautious touch, and he entered just as noiselessly, pushing the door to, but not entirely closing it.

He was now in his own state-room, the transom of which was closed and the curtain drawn, precisely as Kyte Darley had secured his only a few moments before.

Leaning against his berth, Mark Landrum inclined his ear to the thin partition which alone divided his room from that of the plotters.

A faint sound came to his ears, above the thumping of the machinery, to which long use had thoroughly accustomed him. He smiled to himself as though this sound gave him great pleasure.

Satisfied that his adversary was within—possibly engaged in sacrificing to his fetish—Mark Landrum silently moved back to the outer door, peering steadily through the lattice-work.

All unsuspecting this espial, Kyte Darley rose from his crouching position beside his berth, moving toward the outer door, which he cautiously swung open, holding it from swaying or bumping from the motion of the vessel, with one foot, while he gazed eagerly, intently out into the night.

Only the starlight softened the intense gloom which would otherwise have prevailed. It was lighter on board, on the river, than it could have been on shore, which now showed like a low, black wall. Nothing of detail could be made out, even by these keen eyes. It could not be a passion for river scenery that held Kyte Darley motionless so long, staring directly before him, then a little further up the river. And certainly he was not praying—even to his fetish!

As the minutes pass on without a break, a low curse hisses through his clinched teeth, and slipping the object which he had taken from his carpet-bag into his bosom, he cautiously left his room and passed back to the narrow flight of stairs leading to the hurricane deck.

With his head barely above the level, he peered anxiously toward the stern, giving vent to a breath of relief as he distinguished two figures close together, one a woman, the second as plainly a man.

"It's all right!" he muttered, silently advancing in a crouching posture until beside the huge yawl that rested bottom-up on the deck, in the shadow of which he sat down, once more turning his eyes toward the right shore. "Rufus will keep her in play until—ten thousand curses blight them forever if they fail me now!"

Although the gloom was an important factor in the contemplated stroke for the Wellspring millions, just then Kyte Darley wished there was a little more light, if only long enough for him to catch a single clear glimpse of the land. An instant would be enough, for he was perfectly familiar with the landmarks, and then this cursed suspense would at least be relieved.

"I feel that this is the spot—*ha!*"

He caught his breath sharply as he caught sight of a red light that formed a bloody star against the black wall that bordered the star-gemmed sky. He leaned forward with breathless eagerness, watching that light: a light that might possibly come from some lone cabin, or be but a sudden flickering up of a nearly burned-

up log or stump, from which a puff of wind had brushed the accumulating ashes.

Hardly that, though! The red star moved swiftly, erratically, performing sundry gyrations without apparent meaning, but which drew a low and vicious laugh from the lips of the man by the yawl.

"Time, too!" he muttered, as he crept silently across the deck and descended the ladder, returning to his state-room.

Once inside this, he drew a masked lantern from his bosom, and standing well back in his room, opened the slide, his right hand moving in rapid imitation of the gyrations already alluded to, on shore. This occupied but a few moments, and then Kyte Darley closed the lantern, stepping forward and peering intently across the water.

While descending to his room the red light had vanished, but now it suddenly reappeared, remaining stationary for an instant, then shooting high into the air, forming a beautiful parabola as it shot swiftly down to vanish on the bosom of the river.

"Good enough!" muttered Kyte Darley, extinguishing his own light after another fashion, as though it had performed its duty. "Ample time, too! And every thing moves like clock-work! My little spat with that infernally cool hand in yonder, will keep all hands below, for fear of losing the next move in our little game. Nothing could be timed better if that rascal was playing a part in our big game!"

Once more he emerged from his state-room, but this time he moved a short distance toward the bow of the boat. He paused for an instant, as though listening or in doubt, then retraced his steps and once more mounted the ladder to the hurricane deck.

None too soon, although he suspected it not, just then. Rufus Cramp was on the point of despair, having so wretchedly botched the part assigned to him in that dark night's work. Portia Wellspring was just then bidding him a cold good night, preparatory to seeking her state-room, rather than endure further rudeness and insult. And Rufus cast that last impatient glance around, to discover the dim, shadowy figure of Kyte Darley, to which he beckoned hurriedly.

Realizing that something was going wrong, Kyte Darley hastily sprang toward the two figures, forgetting to take his customary precautionary glance behind him. If he had—

A dark shape was already creeping up on deck. There was another crouching low down beside the up-turned yawl.

It is difficult to describe just what followed.

Each shadow played its part, seemingly independent of the other.

Kyte Darley spoke to Rufus Cramp, doffing his hat with a low bow to Portia. She bowed, but turned away. And then—

There was a sudden shifting. There was a struggle. Firearms exploded. Sharp oaths were uttered. One man fell here. Another man reeled there. And over all rose the wild, despairing shriek of a woman!

CHAPTER XIV.

"IF NOT BY WATER, THEN BY HEMP."

In a miraculously short time the alarm spread over the entire boat.

The pistol-shots rung out clear and distinct, and while the startled passengers were breathlessly listening for some further sound that might explain these, the pilot hastily sounded his signals to the launch-deck, shouting aloud:

"Man overboard! Man overboard!"

With a wild rush the passengers abandoned Social Hall and bar, making for the outer air, each one pouring forth questions which no one attempted to answer.

"It came from the hurricane deck!" spluttered Captain Iles, almost wedging his corpulent body in the narrow opening by his clumsy baste. "It's about some woman—I heard her yell!"

The excited passengers swarmed on deck, eager to see and be doing.

There was employment for their eyes, if nothing else, and a dramatic tableau presented itself near the stern of the boat, thrilling enough for the most sensational, though dim and phantom-like in that uncertain light.

A man was lying on the deck, his head partially supported by the woman who bent over him. Near them, half-faced, as though to keep back the curious crowd, was another man, swaying unsteadily on his widely-planted legs, one hand pressed to his head, the other uncertainly flourishing a gleaming revolver.

Pilot Mason, who was then off duty, came rushing half-dressed out of the Texas, in company with several others, and catching Captain Iles by the arm, muttered hastily:

"There's the spice of the devil in all this! Keep the passengers back until we can get at the bottom facts!"

That was sufficient. The master of the *Superb* was prompt enough to act when he had some one to first point out the right course, and he faced the excited, curious crowd with a sharp, commanding voice:

"Keep back, gentlemen! You shall know all in good time, but you mustn't try to crowd in too quick. Back, I say! Shoulder to shoulder,

lads, and let your barkers bite deep if an ordinary hint won't take!"

"Help! he's dying!" gasped the woman, lifting her ghastly white face toward them.

Captain Iles leaped to her side, dropping on his knees and trying to relieve her of her bleeding burden. But his eyes were fastened upon the face of the young woman, and there was an echo of wonder in his voice as he ejaculated:

"You, Miss Wellspring! How unfortunate! How did it happen? What does it all mean, anyhow?"

"I do not know—it was so sudden—so horrible!" was the broken reply, accompanied by a half-sob, half-laugh that plainly threatened hysterics.

"Rufus Cramp!" exclaimed the captain, looking into the face of the man whom he was supporting—a face that was masked in blood and horribly distorted.

"Butchered by an infernal hound!" came a hoarse voice from his elbow, and the startled captain turned his head to recognize the pale, blood-marked face of Kyte Darley.

"To save me!" sobbed Portia Wellspring, hysterically. "And only a moment before I was—I can never forgive myself!"

"Portia—behind me!" feebly muttered Rufus Cramp, glaring about him with eyes that seemed sightless, his tones husky and uncertain.

"You demon! Strike me if—ah!"

A convulsive shiver ran over his frame, and as his weight so suddenly increased, Captain Iles felt that he was holding a corpse in his arms. And Miss Wellspring also seemed smitten with this same fear, for again she bent over the blood-stained face, sobbing bitterly, forgetful how many eyes were fixed upon her, remembering only that this man had fallen in her defense against some unknown assassin.

In bewilderment Captain Iles turned to Kyte Darley, spluttering:

"You can talk—you can tell—you can explain what all this infernal row means. Who did it? What for? Where are they now? Satan limber your tongue, man! will you never spit it out?"

"Man overboard!" repeated the pilot on duty, half-distracted between his curiosity and his responsibility. "Man overboard! want me to telegraph to Orleans to keep an eye open for him? Can't do it, unless you hurry up, for the current's carried him half-way there now!"

"Go relieve him, Mason," hastily uttered the captain, catching at this hope of clearing up the mystery. "Send him here. Maybe he can throw a little light on this infernally dark subject!"

"He is alive!" gasped Miss Wellspring, suddenly lifting her face from over that of Rufus Cramp, with a glad sob. "See! his eyes open again! Do not let him perish, I beg of you, kind people! His blood will rest on my soul—it was for me that he suffered! Look to him, I—"

"He shall have every attention, my dear child," soothingly uttered the captain, his own rough voice choking a little as he looked into her ghastly pale face, as he saw those great brown eyes so full of mingled grief, self-blame and horror. "If you could only tell us how it all happened!"

"It is so confused! Like a dream—like a horrible nightmare!" shuddered the girl, covering her face with trembling hands for an instant, as though striving to collect her scattered senses.

"We were talking together, when a tall man—I could not make out his face, or did not have time—came up and—and rudely insulted me. He said something—I can't recall his words, but they were nasty!" with a shiver of disgust.

"It wasn't—of course it could not have been him!" muttered Captain Iles, nodding toward Kyte Darley, who was standing near, slowly stanching the blood that trickled down over his forehead.

"I do not know—I am sure of nothing—I was so terribly frightened and confused," murmured the girl-woman, one hand pressing her temple as she gazed up into that darkly handsome face.

"I must plead not guilty, captain," a little sharply interjected the gambler, as he felt dangerous looks turning toward him at this uncertain response. "If necessary, Rufe Cramp can clear me."

"Lucky for you, too!" snapped the captain, now thoroughly aroused and determined to sift the matter to the utmost. "My lady passengers are sacred to me as my own daughters, and if I can lay hands on the dastardly cur who dared insult Miss Wellspring, I'll run him up between the smokestacks as a warning to all of his kindred!"

"That's right! Lynch the scoundrel!" echoed a score of voices as the interested spectators began to press nearer.

"He's half-way to Orleans by this time, I tell you!" harshly cried the pilot, breaking a passage through their ranks. "Captain, order out the yawl or I've wasted time and steam in reversing the boat!"

"Overboard? Who? What do you mean?"

"Some one—devil bless me if I know just who!" spluttered the pilot, excitedly. "One of this outfit, anyway!" with a nod toward the three principal figures in the confused little drama.

"The rascal who insulted Miss Wellspring," coldly uttered Kyte Darley. "I knocked him down, and he fell over the guards. But not before he dropped Cramp, and marked me, as you see for yourselves."

Uncertain though the starlight was, it revealed the fresh blood on his face as he lowered the saturated handkerchief.

Few words, but they were enough, taken with what had fallen from the blanched lips of the girl-woman, and what their own eyes had seen. A sullen, ugly muttering rose among the passengers that quickly broke into audible words:

"Out with the boat! Pick the rascal up, alive! Drowning's too good for him! Better hemp than water!"

"Look to the lady, Hoover!" cried Captain Iles, leaping to his feet and hastening away to direct the manning and lowering of the heavy yawl that swung from chains at the stern of the vessel.

"This poor man first," insisted the girl-woman, shrinking from the kindly clerk, her eyes resting on the blood-marked face of Rufus Cramp. "I am strong—he is dying, I fear!"

"I'm all right—it's nothing!" muttered the wounded man, suddenly sitting up. "You, Portia—and here? I thought—"

"Don't try to think, old fellow," hastily interposed Kyte Darley, an uneasy look upon his blood-marked face. "It's all right, you know! You've got a little hurt, but—"

"My cheek is all shot away!" mumbled Cramp, lifting one hand to his face in a dazed manner.

"For me—and I was so cruel!" murmured the girl-woman, impulsively bending forward and tenderly touching her lips to the bullet-scarred cheek. "Forgive me, dear friend—say that you will forgive!"

"Stand back, gentlemen, if you please," sharply uttered Kyte Darley, as he interposed his graceful figure as a sort of shield. "Give us room, if you have any sense of politeness or decency left. Look to the poor fellow, Hoover, while I care for the lady. Come," he whispered, in his softest, smoothest tones as he stooped and gently, yet firmly, lifted her to her feet. "Come with me, Miss Wellspring, I beg of you!"

There was no actual resistance on her part, though she turned her face over her shoulder toward the wounded man as Kyte led her to the ladder and toward her own room.

Although all this consumed time, as a matter of fact but very few minutes elapsed since the first alarm was given. In such situations men think, speak and act rapidly.

As Kyte Darley led the girl-woman away; as Hoover and the mate assisted Rufus Cramp to his feet, half carrying, half supporting his footsteps from the hurricane deck, the excited passengers pressed closer to the stern, some striving to catch a glimpse of the vile assassin whom they believed was being tossed about in the wake of the steamer, others watching the hasty movements of the crew, who were lowering and manning the heavy yawl, under direction of the captain, who was already seated in the stern.

Under the skillful management of Pilot Mason, the Superb was slowly dropping down the river, stern first. In obedience to his signals, the wheels now turned forward, then backward, keeping the vessel straight with the current, and at all times under his complete control. It would be too risky to permit the current to have full sway, yet he did not like to lose too much ground, supposing the man all were desirous of recovering, dead or alive, was either floating or swimming down-stream.

Just as the boat was successfully lowered and oars shipped by the lights of the now blazing fire-crates which had been hastily prepared, Kyte Darley returned to the upper deck, and leaning far over the railing, called out, in clear, hard tones:

"Bring him back alive, if possible, captain. He owes me a shot!"

Not many words, but they were quite enough to set loose the evil passions that such a scene naturally generated.

"Save him for the rope!"

"Drowning's too merciful a death!"

"If we can't show the broom, we'll spread-eagle an assassin!"

"Or shove his carcass into the furnace, to get up steam again!"

More savage, more vicious, grew their voices, and something of the same deadly temper rung out in the voice of Captain Iles as he urged his men to bend their backs with vigor.

"Drop far enough down to get his head between us and the crates, and he's our meat!" he cried, bending forward and sweeping the wave-broken surface of the river with his eyes.

"Two to one they don't catch him!" cried one inveterate devotee of chance.

"I'll take you, in hundreds!" sharply cried Kyte Darley, the ruling passion stronger even than his terrible inward anxiety.

And then, while watching the progress of the yawl, many others proposed and accepted bets for or against the success of the search. It was a curious scene, but one that has many parallels in history.

Here and there the yawl was rowed, directed

by Captain Iles, whose trained eyes sought in vain for a glimpse of the assassin, head or body, as he might be consciously swimming or lifelessly floating. Back and forth, scanning every foot of the surface as it was gradually lighted up by the blazing fire-crates, but ever in vain. And then, reluctantly, though knowing that he had done all that was possible to do under the circumstances, Captain Iles gave the word to return to the steamer.

In silence he was obeyed. In silence his return was noted, for all now knew that his quest had been without the fruits they expected and hoped for. In silence Kyte Darley turned to the man with whom he had made that bet, handing him the easily won money.

"I hate to take it, old fellow," was the remark. "I'd a thousand times rather lost than won. Indeed," with a short laugh, "I bet as I did because I'm so infernally unlucky that I thought sure it would bring that scoundrel back to a bempen festival!"

"And your ill-fortune still clings to you," retorted Darley, with a short, metallic laugh.

"Do you know, I never once thought of that!" ejaculated the winner ruefully, as he pocketed his gains.

"Have you any idea who the fellow was, Darley?" ventured another, as the party turned to leave the hurricane deck.

Kyte cast a swift glance into the face of the speaker, but as quickly drooped his lids again. For a brief space he was silent, then:

"I prefer not to speak on a mere suspicion. Doubtless the captain will try to get at the bottom facts."

"But how can he? If you can't swear—"

"The register will tell, when the roll is called, I imagine," significantly responded the gambler.

It was a bright idea, yet one that, so simple, after all, had not occurred to one of their number until Kyte Darley gave them the hint.

"Good enough! If we can't have the sport of stringing the dirty whelp up between the smokestacks, at least we can take it out in cursing his name and memory!" laughed the other, quickening his footsteps under this impulse.

Having sowed the seed, Kyte Darley was quite content to let the others attend to it, at once making his way to the state-room which was occupied jointly by Rufus Cramp and himself. Here he found the wounded schemer, and a doctor who was skillfully attending to his injury, professional training having conquered the curiosity which so wholly kept possession of his fellow passengers.

"How goes it, Mordaunt?" hurriedly asked Darley as he entered the narrow quarters.

"Nothing really serious, is it?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear fellow!" cheerily replied the doctor, with a glance over his shoulder. "Nothing more than a scratch."

"My whole cheek is blown to the devil!" mumbled Cramp, groaning.

Kyte Darley laughed softly, with a faint malice.

"Better there than in any other direction, eh, Rufe?"

"May Satan send for you to keep guard over it until I come to claim my own!" snapped his comrade, viciously, angered by that sly hint.

"I beg your pardon, old fellow," soberly replied Darley, knowing that now, if ever, they must pull together. "It is better to laugh than to moan, and I thought—never mind: let it pass. The captain has returned from his search for the rascal, but without finding him."

"Ten thousand curses cover him a million fathoms deep in the lowest, hottest pit of To-phet!" snarled the wounded man, savagely.

"Ditto to ditto, whoever he may turn out to be," laughed Darley, as he possessed himself of one hand and significantly pressed it in a manner that conveyed a warning to the hot-head owner. "I think I could give a tolerably close guess at his name, but suspicions are not proof, and so I'll hold my tongue until the oracle speaks."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Rufus, suspiciously.

"Captain Iles will hardly rest easy until he gets at the bottom facts, and unless the fellow has left his ghost behind to answer to his name when the roll is called, I fancy his memory will be painted blacker than the footiest blackamoor now on board the Superb!"

"You mean?" hesitated Cramp, an uneasy light in his eyes.

"That you will have to attend the muster. That you will feel all the brighter in the morning if you try to think of nothing more exciting than how quickly you can get to sleep. How's that, doctor?"

"Most admirable advice, and to insure its being taken as directed—get out with you, rattle-tongue!" the physician exclaimed, flinging up his arms and uttering that peculiar sound with which women attempt to terrify agricultural hens and trespassing porkers.

"I vanish, doctor—or I will in another moment," laughed Darley, as he again glanced toward his comrade, saying hurriedly: "I am going to ask how Miss Wellspring fares, Cramp; shall I take any message from you?"

"No!" snapped Rufus, suddenly averting his

bandaged face. "She'll hardly care to hear from me, even through *your* lips!"

"You do her great injustice, old fellow," gravely responded Kyte, stepping to the edge of the berth. "If you could have seen and heard how she took on over you, when we all thought you were a dying man, you wouldn't try to harden your mind against her after this fashion."

"It was me that devil was after—only for me she wouldn't have been mixed up in such an ugly scrape, I tell you!" mumbled Cramp.

"Well, time will tell," lightly added Kyte Darley, turning to the door once more. "I can understand your feelings, but, all the same, I'm going to invent the messages you had ought by rights to send the lady, provided, of course, she is not too much prostrated to see me."

"Hysteria, nothing more serious, I give you my professional word," briskly uttered the physician, pushing Darley out of the room. "You are in far worse fettle, but you refuse to intrust yourself to my care," he added, with a reproachful, regretful glance at the gambler's head, about which Darley had hastily knotted a handkerchief.

"A mere nothing—not enough to bother about," laughed Kyte, a malicious sparkle in his black eyes, as he added: "You know the old adage: save me from my—physician! And life is still dear to me, remarkable as that may sound in your ears!"

Gay, careless, lighthearted as ever he seemed while under the gaze of the little doctor, but the instant his back was turned, a very different expression came into his face and filled his eyes. All was not a bed of roses to him, just then!

Unheeding the curious, eager looks which greeted his appearance in the ladies' cabin, Kyte Darley walked direct to the door of Portia's state-room, rapping gently. A moment's pause, a moment's suspense, then the door swung open and Miss Wellspring stood revealed.

"Pardon my intrusion, Miss Wellspring," said Kyte with a profound bow. "I come from my friend, Rufus Cramp, who is anxious to learn that you have not suffered seriously from this truly unfortunate affair."

"And he—he is faring well?" eagerly yet falteringly uttered the girl-woman, her brown eyes glowing, her pale, beautiful face betraying no little anxiety. "Tell me the truth, I implore you!" her voice rising a little in her anxiety.

"I am glad that I can do so without giving you either alarm or regret, Miss Wellspring," calmly, reassuringly responded the gambler. "Mr. Cramp is not seriously injured. Indeed, I feel confident that he will be on foot as usual in the morning."

"I am so glad!" clasping her little hands, a slight flush tinged the pallor of her cheeks. "I was afraid—it was all for me—"

"That fact alone should be quite sufficient to restore him. And you? I may tell him that all is well?"

"Yes. Now that I am sure he will not suffer so much—now that I know he is sure to recover—I will soon be myself again."

Those in the cabin who could see and hear, interchanged knowing glances. It would be well with both, no doubt! If a wedding did not spring from that night's adventure, then romance must forever hide its diminished head.

Soon after, Kyte Darley bowed his adieu, and retreated from the cabin, Miss Wellspring closing and locking the door behind him.

The office and social hall were crowded with passengers, more or less interested and excited as Kyte Darley reached them. Captain Iles was standing before the massive railing that separated the office proper from the rest of the space, his voice rising clear and distinct:

"Gentlemen, you all know that a most disgraceful event has taken place this evening on the Superb. As captain of this boat, I am in a greater measure than any of you interested in solving the mystery. If I fail, it will ever rest as a vile blot on my record, and—"

"Not that bad, captain," warmly cried Darley.

"Just that bad, begging your pardon for repeating the words," obstinately retorted the official. "I am here to protect the rights and privileges of my passengers. I am here to see that they are not insulted or abused. It is part of my sworn duty to make my passengers as comfortable, to make them feel as safe and much at ease as though they were still inside their own homes. And if I fail in this, the sooner I resign my commission and retire to private life, the better for all concerned."

"You are too hard on yourself, captain," respectfully insisted Kyte Darley. "You are not supposed to know every scoundrel who elects to travel on your boat. You did not put that fellow up to insulting a lady, nor advise him to shoot a couple of men simply because they tried the best they knew to shield her. If you do your best to discover who the villain really was, you perform your whole duty, I say."

"Of course he does!" echoed the passengers.

Captain Iles flushed with honest satisfaction at this unanimous testimony, and raised his hand for silence, which instantly reigned.

"I tried my level best to catch the rascal, but

failed. As the next best thing, I want to see what man is missing from on board. To do that the clerk will read over the names on the register, and when a name is called without an answer—well, I reckon we'll know just what *that* means!"

Cheers followed this grim conclusion, but silence was again restored as Clerk Hoover began calling out the names upon the book, as they were recorded there, of course omitting the lady passengers.

Promptly, clearly, moving forward as though to remove the slightest vestige of doubt, each man answered to his name as called out. One by one, without a break, until each state-room or berth on one side of the boat was accounted for. Then—the name of Wilfred Bangs was called.

There was no answer. Men glanced swiftly about the crowd, then their brows began to lower and their eyes to glow dangerously. Where was the sickly passenger? Why did he not answer to his name?

"It is barely possible that he is asleep, or too weak to leave his berth," ventured Kyte Darley, after a brief silence.

"I'll quickly settle that point, if these gentlemen will appoint me a committee of one to investigate," grimly replied Captain Iles.

Prompt and unanimous came the response, and all eyes watched the official as he strode down to the state-room assigned to the invalid. They saw him try the door. Saw him knock sharply on the panel. Breathlessly they watched, with a growing conviction that the criminal was discovered at last, as the moments sped by without change in the position of the captain. But then—the door opened and they drew a long breath as they saw Iles step inside the state-room.

"I was beginning to grow actually faint," laughed Kyte Darley, one hand sweeping rapidly across his brow. "If it should have been that poor, puny little runt I would have dropped myself overboard as food to poison catfish."

In a very few moments Captain Iles was seen returning, shaking his head gravely as he entered the office, his voice even more grave.

"He is there, but I'm afraid only his body will reach St. Louis. Go on, Hoover; the end must come mighty soon now!"

He was right. Almost the next name was unresponded to.

Sure enough, where was Mark Landrum?

"Where?" cried Kyte Darley, his eyes flashing vividly, his voice ringing out clear and cold as he answered the unspoken question that was written on every face about him. "On shore—at the bottom of the river—but most certainly *not* aboard this vessel! I can say it now without fear of being called or thought a back-biter. I can say it without a fear of having any one among you all think that I am seeking an excuse to avoid a contest proposed by Mark Landrum himself. The one who insulted Miss Wellspring—who tried to murder both Rufus Cramp and myself when we resented his conduct—the man whom I knocked over the guards into the river—was none other than Mark Landrum!"

CHAPTER XV.

TWO ROGUES FALL OUT.

THERE was no mincing or mouthing; sharp and clear was the voice in which Kyte Darley uttered those words, and his accusation was to the full as keen and emphatic.

Although something of this had naturally been expected by the passengers when Mark Landrum failed to respond to his name, there was an uneasy stir among them, a sort of instinctive shrinking such as even the boldest of men will show when they anticipate the letting loose of bullets, a quick, half-shy glancing around in quest of that tall form and coldly smiling face.

Captain Iles was one of the most thoroughly astonished, for he had been well impressed with this stranger, and he ejaculated:

"It don't seem possible! What could induce him to—"

"You shall see," sharply interposed the gambler, twin spots of red marking his cheeks, his eyes no longer sleepy nor his voice languid. "I make no charges behind a man's back that I would not gladly repeat to his face. If Mark Landrum is on board, why does he not confront his accuser?"

"That's fair! Let him show up!"

"Who is he, anyhow? Who knows him?"

Kyte Darley showed his white teeth in a peculiar smile as these words escaped the excited crowd. His black eyes roved swiftly over the mass of faces, resting on one particularly red specimen.

"I think you can tell the gentlemen what they wish to learn, Mr. Burgess," he said, distinctly. "You were the first to penetrate the disguise of Mark Landrum. Will you oblige?"

"Out with it, old man!" cried an enthusiastic friend, shoving the somewhat reluctant planter forward. "Play it straight, or blessed if we won't begin to think you and Landrum are playing cahoots!"

The speech and action were simply rough playfulness, but in the state of smothered excitement which reigned, even a hint of that sort is eagerly caught up and turned to deadly earn-

est. Low growls were rapidly growing into open threats, when the greater fear overcome the lesser, and Thomas Burgess plunged forward, more to be under the protecting arm of Kyte Darley than aught else.

"You more than hinted that Mark Landrum was not Mark Landrum, but some one else; do you know his every-day name?" coldly asked Kyte.

"I didn't know him at first, he has changed so much, without long hair and a beard and all that, you know," rather incoherently replied the red-faced planter, his eyes uneasily roving about him.

"It is not what he isn't, but what he is—or was!—that we want to discover," smiled Darley, tapping his witness on one shoulder.

"Duke Barringer, then!" was the sullen response.

"The Duke of Derringers—precisely," bowed Kyte Darley, flashing his eyes over the crowd. "Many of you heard what passed between this counterfeit duke and myself, gentlemen, and you must remember how I sought to penetrate his disguise. I was not positive, then, though I could almost have taken oath that Mark Landrum was Marmaduke Barringer. There was one test which I knew could not fail, and this is why I consented to meet the fellow at a game of cards."

There was silence all about him. The growing fury of the crowd suddenly subsided. Was it fear alone that caused this? Or was it disapproval—doubt?

Kyte Darley smiled until a white line parted his red lips.

"It does sound just a little queer I admit, gentlemen, but perhaps I can make it clear even to your minds. Why was this pretended stranger so anxious to engage me in a game of cards, where, after all that was said, one or the other of us must surely go broke? Simply because I am the friend of the man Duke Barringer hates—or hated—beyond all others on earth: Rufus Cramp!"

"I should place the boot on the other foot!" bluntly ejaculated Captain Iles, his rather sluggish mind unable to closely follow Kyte.

"Wait a moment, please," laughed Darley, easily. "I know you are thinking of that little affair back in Orleans. I know you think, as many another thought at the time and still continues to believe, that my friend got all the worst of that matter."

"He got all of the caning, anyhow!" coarsely cried one of the men.

"Granted; and he was all the worse for liquor, too, you might have added," retorted Darley easily, no whit discouraged by the tide apparently turning full against him and the friend whom he was championing. "Yet I tell you, one and all, that Rufus Cramp got the better of the Duke of Derringers then and ever since!"

"As you may some of you remember, there was a lady in the case," he added, lowering his voice and assuming a graver expression as befitted the occasion. "That same lady is a passenger on this vessel, hastening to the sick-bed of her father. That father sent Rufus Cramp to escort her to St. Louis. Why? Simply because he could not possibly have chosen a more suitable escort, since his daughter and this escort are plighted lovers."

"Wouldn't it—that is—" blundered the worthy captain.

"I understand your meaning, sir," bowed Kyte Darley, with a grave earnestness that set right well on his darkly handsome face, "but I could not fully explain this unfortunate affair without touching on the delicate subject: and we are all gentlemen, I believe?"

It was an adroit touch that won him more than the most elaborate argument. Of course they were gentlemen. That went without saying. But all the same, it was a species of truthful flattery few can resist.

"Duke Barringer was also a suitor for the lady's hand, but of course his advances were discouraged. He was too keen a man of the world to remain long in ignorance why this was so, and out of that knowledge grew this ugly little affair."

"To show how bitter he was, how desperate his defeat had made him, let me tell you what happened the night before the Superb left Orleans, simply premising that the truth of my charge can be substantiated by Chief of Police Martin Tullar."

Briefly but clearly Darley told how the Duke of Derringers had waylaid his successful rival, attempting to kill him and abduct the lady in question. He handled the subject with admirable tact, saying nothing that could not be proven by the records, apparently. He showed how it was that Duke Barringer had come aboard in disguise, no doubt expecting the officers of justice would be on the eager lookout for him under his usual appearance. Then he went on:

"Though I suspected him from the first, I could not be positive. I would not risk injuring an innocent man by denouncing him as the criminal, and as an excuse to get at the bottom facts, I consented to meet him across the table, where I felt sure he would betray himself

unconsciously, if indeed he was the Duke of Derringers.

"Either way, I knew that it would take no small amount of money to keep him in play long enough to read him through and through. I had some, but I doubted if I had sufficient. For that reason alone I played for a brief delay, knowing that Cramp would cheerfully supply what I lacked.

"I knew he was on deck with the lady, who required fresh air and exercise to keep up her strength, shaken by the natural fears of a daughter. I saw them there, and waited until I could catch his eye, if possible, or else until the lady chose to go below.

"No doubt that fellow dogged me; or, it may be, that chance brought him to where he could see what he had lost and another man won. Anyhow, Mark Landrum or Duke Barringer pushed in between them, using insulting speech, as you all heard the lady declare. Cramp struck at or shoved the villain back, and I rushed forward to stop the row. Before I could reach them, a shot was fired, and Cramp fell. A second shot was sent at me, but it only grazed, and I hit the scoundrel the best I knew how. He staggered or tripped, and fell over the guards. The rest you know."

It was apparently a clear case against Mark Landrum, or Marmaduke Barringer, whichever he might be, and had he put in an appearance just then, in all human probability there would have been a neck-tie festival after the most approved fashion.

Captain Hes instituted a search that resulted thus: The man who had registered as Mark Landrum was no longer on board; every other passenger was fully accounted for; and so, beyond a doubt, he was the rascal who had kicked up all this bobbery.

It was fully daylight before matters fairly quieted down on board the Superb, and even then the matter formed almost the only topic of conversation among the passengers.

Both Rufus Cramp and Kyte Darley seemed not a little astonished as Miss Wellspring made her appearance at the breakfast table, still a little pale, with just the faintest of shadows beneath her glorious brown eyes. But a soft blush suffused her cheeks as she glanced down the long table and saw Rufus Cramp, his head bandaged, his left eye almost swollen shut from the effects of that bullet through his cheek.

She whispered a word to the gallant captain, who sent the negro waiters right and left as he tore along to execute her commands. And with his aid, Rufus Cramp was soon installed next to the heiress.

Why not? What was more proper? He had risked his life to save her from insult, and then the words dropped by Kyte Darley were public property long ago; probably Miss Wellspring alone was ignorant of the fact that she was regarded as his betrothed.

Instead of ill, that night adventure seemed to have wrought good. It certainly had driven away the sad, brooding apathy that had so far marked Portia as its own. She no longer kept close within her state-room, though she was still reserved, still rather shrunk from the lady passengers, who looked upon her as a double, if not a treble, heroine. A great heiress, a betrothed bride, the indirect cause of a horrid man's death! It was too precious utter! Or would have been, had the æsthetic apostle been his own father, and by so much antedated his visit to these benighted shores.

Kyte Darley, too, appeared to reap the benefit of his manly conduct in that little adventure. Miss Wellspring begged the captain to introduce him, after a more regular fashion, and her hours were divided between the two comrades with tolerable impartiality. The most of these were spent on the hurricane deck, for though the summer sun was hot, there was always a comfortable breeze over the surface of the broad river, and either Kyte or Rufus seemed only too glad of the opportunity of holding her sunshade.

It does not take so very much to interest passengers on a slow boat (and the Superb seemed determined to outdo herself, if not in reducing one record, in exceeding another) and the trio attracted more attention than two of them at least wished for. And long before the signal for supper sounded, it was pretty generally decided that Kyte Darley was cutting out the running at a rare pace; that Rufus Cramp was more disgusted than pleased with the situation, and rapidly allowing his disagreeable side to come uppermost.

"It isn't a matter to make bets about," observed one inveterate gambler, who had taken the closest interest in the little comedy, "but if any gentleman wishes to give suitable odds, I don't mind backing the black against the white, to win the stakes before the Superb gets to St. Louis."

There were no offers, however. The manner in which Rufus Cramp exhibited the "off cross" in his blood, lost him what few friends he might otherwise have had. Professed gambler though he was, Kyte Darley was ten times the gentleman his room-mate ever could become.

"If he isn't in dead earnest, then I can't read

a man's face!" declared the same shrewd observer to his especial cronies. "Kyte is actually going in for the big stake! And the prize don't seem half-displeased, either."

It may have been so. It was possible that Portia still remembered the words Rufus Cramp had let drop on the hurricane deck just before the "accident" occurred. It might be that, while she could hardly help showing him how grateful she was for what he had done, how much sympathy she felt for his injury, received in her behalf, she treated Kyte Darley with rather more kindness than might have been the case had she not wished to show Rufus that she held herself in no wise bound by the wishes he affirmed her father had expressed.

Either way, that was a wretched day for Rufus Cramp, and long before supper time came, he was cross and surly as the proverbial bear with a sore head. He refrained from taking the seat beside Miss Wellspring which he had occupied at breakfast and at dinner. He ate little, perhaps because his wounded jaw forbid, but more likely because of his sullen anger. He outsat the rest at the table, and scowled viciously at all about him. He rudely repulsed Doctor Mordaunt when that worthy gently hinted that he would be all the better for rest, and much more comfortable in his berth.

"What is it?" he growled, surlily. "Only a scratch. Go nurse Kyte Darley, if you must be pottering about some one!"

"I think Mr. Darley has found a much more agreeable surgeon than even I can pride myself on being," maliciously laughed the doctor, with a glance toward the ladies' cabin, where the handsome gambler was gayly laughing and conversing with Miss Wellspring.

Though he tried to refrain from so doing, Rufus Cramp was forced to follow that glance, and his brows contracted fiercely. Even he could not help acknowledging that Miss Wellspring had never looked more lovely than now. Her pallor was gone. Her cheeks were softly flushed, her great brown eyes were sparkling with animation. And how abominably handsome that infernal villain looked! And how tender, without in the least overstepping the bounds of strict decorum!

"Would you like to see him?" softly asked the doctor, bent on getting even for his snubbing. "It would be a pity to break up such a charming picture, but nothing is too much for me to do for a patient."

"Go to Hades!" snarled Cramp, rising with a vigor that upset his chair with a clatter that drew all eyes toward him.

He saw the handsome couple looking toward him, and as he turned away, he caught a low, musical laugh. *Laughing at him*—with Kyte Darley! His face grew pale as death, and an ugly glow filled his blue eyes as he strode on to the bar.

There Kyte Darley found him drinking, an hour later, his face growing flushed and swollen with combined liquor, jealousy and hatred. Even then it might have come out all right in the end, and a night's sleep have restored sanity, at least in outward seeming, had Kyte Darley been content to leave his comrade to himself.

Instead, he openly remonstrated with him on acting so foolishly.

"You should be in your bunk and sleeping, old man, instead of poisoning yourself with all this hot stuff. Come—let me help you to your state-room."

"Keep your advice and your assistance for those who need them, will you?" snapped Rufus, with an ugly frown. "Who made me your patient? I'm all right, if you let me alone!"

Kyte shrugged his shoulders with a little smile that by no means improved the temper of his companion.

"All right, old fellow, if you prefer it so. I press my aid on no man, and as Mark Landrum has kindly vacated his quarters for—let us hope warmer if not more comfortable—others, I'll just transfer my little dunnage to that room."

"No need of that," muttered Cramp, a little uneasily.

"It was simply a temporary arrangement, you know," lightly responded Darley. "I spoke for the first vacated room, if you remember."

He insisted on carrying this intention into effect, and after the clerk took possession and put seals upon the baggage found in the state-room, Kyte Darley completed his change of quarters.

"Is it because you think you'll have a better chance to meet her, that you want to get out of eyeshot?" muttered Cramp, with a sickly smile when next they met.

"Not at all," was the prompt response. "I never could bear to sleep in an upper berth, and you, as an invalid, of course must have the best the ship affords."

"I'm man enough to match you at any and all points, Kyte Darley!" was the vicious rejoinder, though to all outward seeming they were conversing peaceably. "Look out, you! Try to play crooked, and I'll have the measure of your heart, if I hang the next minute!"

"You're drunk, old man," laughed Kyte, with annoying solicitude. "You'll be flat on your back in the morning, if you don't act with a lit-

tle more common sense. Go to bed and sleep it off. Remember—our game is not yet won!"

"You've been acting as though it was—all but pocketing the stakes!" muttered Rufus Cramp.

"Of which neither you nor I will ever finger a penny, unless you play your hand a little more carefully," curtly retorted Kyte, turning on his heel and leaving his fellow conspirator.

From the nature of things, almost the only source of amusement on board a river steamer, particularly after the shades of night have fallen, is to be found in cards. Talking soon grows tiresome. Stories cannot be repeated over and over again without growing stale. Reading is hard on the eyes, even now with the improved lights. Yet one must do something to keep from wholly stagnating: and card-playing is the universal panacea—or was, at the time this record treats of.

Though too well known as a "hawk" to get into a game of much importance, or without a moderate limit to the betting, Kyte Darley was a true-born gambler, and loved playing for playing's sake—when nothing more remunerative offered itself. And such being the case, this memorable night found him seated at a table with sundry companions, playing poker.

For several hours Rufus Cramp had been invisible, and Kyte Darley had long since reached the conclusion that he had retired, to sleep off his ill-humor, when he was surprised by that identical personage dropping into a chair at the table, just vacated by one of the players, whose ill-luck had discouraged him from longer wooing the coy goddess.

Where all were supposably gentlemen—and a gambler was not so rigidly ruled out in those days—of course no objection could be made to this substitution, though Kyte Darley did venture to hint something about imprudent exposure. But this was so ungraciously received by Rufus Cramp, that he dropped the subject once for all, and the game went on.

Not nearly so smoothly as before, however. Rufus Cramp was in an ugly, vicious mood, and though the other players, save Darley, insisted on keeping to the limit originally fixed, he pressed the game as heavily as circumstances would permit, rarely "calling" himself, betting the limit as often as any one of the party would "stay in" without "calling."

And, though ordinarily hardly what one could term a "lucky hand," fortune seemed to specially favor him this night. It was the original game of "straight poker," as distinguished from the more recent "draw," and with a game that can be played so rapidly, even with a modest "limit" on single bets, much money can be won and lost. And so, before the hour of midnight arrived, Rufus Cramp and Kyte Darley were left alone at their table.

"I wouldn't press good luck too hard, old fellow," laughed the professional, as he leaned back in his chair, idly shuffling the cards as he spoke. "You've made your day's wages. Now take a friend's advice and go to bed. You look quite knocked up—really!"

"Then you own up that you're afraid to keep on playing against such luck, as you choose to call it?" sneered Cramp, rudely.

"Against all rules and regulations, my dear boy," sleepily laughed Kyte. "Like to oblige you, but I really couldn't go so far. I'd be ruled out of the profession, certain!"

"For telling the simple truth?"

"For telling a lie," yawned Darley, behind his shapely hand.

"Good!" and the eyes of the other blazed brightly. "You will play me an unlimited game, or else own up that you are afraid of my skill—I really beg pardon!" with a hard laugh. "I mean—*luck!*"

Kyte Darley was no longer smiling. He gravely looked into the inflamed face of his adversary, speaking coldly, distinctly:

"You fully understand what you are saying, Mr. Cramp?"

"Shall I repeat my words?"

"You ask me to play you for money, without a limit?"

"I dare you to do so! Of course, if you are afraid—"

"I wouldn't say the rest, if I were you, Mr. Cramp," was the cold, almost icy interruption. "Please sit down. Waiter, a fresh pack of cards, if you will be so kind."

There was a little hum of growing interest in Social Hall as Rufus Cramp dropped into the chair opposite his late friend. All who knew Kyte Darley knew that he never assumed that painfully polite tone unless he meant strict business, and those who did not know, were quite shrewd enough to make a pretty close guess at the truth.

All other games were dropped and a silent, attentive crowd gathered about this particular table, keenly watching each move, noting every bet and bluff, feeling that something more than ordinary was underlying this almost savage challenge.

Never mind the minute details. It was the old story over again. A cold, steel-nerved gambler playing against a rash, desperate man.

The wagers ran high. Almost from the first the tide ran in favor of Kyte Darley, as might

naturally be expected, contrasting the men one with the other. Rufus Cramp pressed fortune to the utmost, and occasionally won a heavy sum, for as all who knew the game thoroughly could see, Kyte Darley disdained to avail himself of his superior skill and experience to deal foul. So careful was he that all should see this, Rufus Cramp even charged him with purposely delaying the game by such slow, painstaking dealing; but Kyte Darley went on unmoved.

Then—betting grew high. Cramp put up all his ready cash, and with forced politeness asked his adversary what amount his note would stand good for.

"Any sum within reason," was the cold response.

Rufus Cramp hastily wrote on a slip of paper, passing it across the table. Reading it, Darley coldly wrote another line or two, and after handing it to his adversary for inspection, said:

"You are quite satisfied, Mr. Cramp?"

"More so than you will be, I'm thinking!" cried the other, as he faced his cards—four kings—and asked: "How do you like them?"

"Much better than you will these, I fancy," laughed Darley, as he deftly "strung" his hand, an ace falling opposite each king.

That was before the "royal flush" was fully recognized, and thus one deal had brought out the two highest hands in the entire deck; a thing that very rarely can happen, without judicious "assistance."

For an instant Rufus Cramp glared at the cards, turning fairly livid, but then, as Kyte reached out to draw down the stakes, he cried:

"You scoundrel! You've dealt foul! Two such hands couldn't turn up in a single-handed game without cheating!"

Pale as death, but still icy cold, still with unshaken nerves, Kyte Darley drew back his hand from the stakes, slowly saying:

"Do you fully comprehend what you are saying, Mr. Cramp?"

"You are a vile, cheating scoundrel!" panted Rufus, beside himself.

"Gentlemen, I appeal to you all," calmly uttered Darley, still in that icy cold voice. "You have eyes. You saw me deal. You have watched the game from beginning to end. I ask you—have I attempted to take any unfair advantage of this madman?"

The response was instant and unanimous; the dealing had been perfectly fair, and so deliberate, on his part, at least, that there could not possibly have been foul play without detection.

"You hear, Mr. Cramp? Now beg my pardon, if you please."

"I'll cut your cheating heart out first!" snarled Cramp, jerking forth a knife and making a vicious lunge across the table.

Kyte Darley leaped lightly back, a derringer dropped into his hand, a large bore covering his adversary as he cried icily:

"Take that drunken idiot away, some of you, or I'll kill him!"

It was a strange degree of forbearance on his part, for report said that Kyte Darley was quick on the trigger, and as deadly as the hooded snake when insulted. But still he meant just what he said, as none who heard his voice could doubt, and several men flung themselves upon Rufus Cramp, forcing him back, fighting and cursing. And then—

There came a tremendous shock that flung all to the floor!

CHAPTER XVI.

A DUEL, AND—GHOSTS?

THE Superb shook from stem to stern, groaning in every timber, creaking in every joint, shivering like a veritable thing of life after that first frightful shock. Chairs and tables were sent sliding or fairly upset. The chandeliers were robbed of porcelain and glass, adding the probability of fire to the rest. Strong men were flung headlong, and Social Hall was little short of a pandemonium with yells, oaths and cries of terrified surprise.

"Struck a snag!"

"The boiler's busted!"

"Fire! fire!"

These and a score different cries went up from that demoralized gathering, while even above the other tumult, rose the shrill, terrified shrieks of women from the other end of the boat.

Even as the shock hurled him forward and against the table, Kyte Darley caught at and secured the bits of paper which had formed the final stakes in that memorable game of straight poker, and though he lost his derringer in the mad scramble that ensued, he kept the stake safe.

He was among the first to regain his feet, and though the shivering, throbbing of the wounded steamer made footing very uncertain, he was the foremost of those who dashed to the aid of the women. It was his hand that rolled apart the partition and tore aside the heavy curtains, and his white face that met the frightened gaze of Miss Wellspring as she flung open the door of her state-room and sprang into the cabin, wrapped tightly in a cloak.

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated Kyte, his strong arms clasping her shivering form tightly to his bosom. "I feared you might—"

"What is it? What has happened?" panted the girl-woman, even as she spoke nestling still closer to him.

"A snag or sawyer—listen!"

"There is no danger—keep cool, all of you!" bellowed the stentorian voice of Captain Iles, making itself heard even above the confused babel of cries and groans and shrieks. "We just grazed a snag, but there's no harm done, if—"

"She's going down, Cap! help save the books! Can't last—"

With a fierce curse Iles turned and dashed his heavy fist full in the face of his excited clerk, knocking him headlong; but the mischief was done without much hope of remedy.

For one fleeting breath the passengers were silent, motionless, as though suddenly changed from flesh to marble by those terribly significant words, all the more readily believed from the heavy shock they all had experienced but a few moments before. Then—

The wildest confusion. The maddest scrambling. Blows and curses, thrusts and mad blasphemy. Each man fighting with his fellows to see which shall be the first to reach the outer air and thus secure the best chance that might offer for escaping the impending death. All honor, manhood, friendship was lost in that savage scramble.

Captain Iles begged, prayed, cursed and fought as he called on them to remember the helpless woman, but he was overpowered and trampled on by the madmen in that blind, unreasoning rush.

To their honor, be it said, there were a few men who did not forget themselves so wholly. A few who rushed back to the little groups of terrified women in time to save some of the most wildly distracted from casting themselves over the low guards into the rushing waters.

But little of all this did either Miss Wellspring or Kyte Darley witness. The instant those words of the captain came to his ears, the experienced gambler knew what they meant, and hurriedly uttered:

"Trust to me, darling, and I'll save you! Will you?"

Their eyes met, and there was no need for further speech. Kyte just touched her uplifted lips with his, then lifted her in his strong arms, dashed through her state-room, out upon the guards, taking a swift, comprehensive glance about him as he reached the outer air.

Dim though the starlight was, only partially relieved by the first rays of the rising moon, he could see that the Superb had changed her course and was now heading direct for land, rushing ahead under the fullest head of steam that the pilot's signals could summon.

That fact alone told him that the case was about as serious as it well could be, without the boat's having actually broken in two on the snag or sawyer. He knew that even if the bar was reached before the water conquered, there must be another terrific shock while that rate of speed was maintained, and with hardly an instant's hesitation he rushed up to the hurricane deck, with the girl-woman still in his arms.

There was no time for speech. Almost as soon as the couple gained the deck, the end came—one far more favorable than Kyte Darley had dared to hope for.

Steady and true, faithful to their charge, the two pilots sent the boat straight for the bar which they knew afforded the passengers their only hope of escaping a battle with the deep waters. It was a frightfully narrow margin; the water was rushing into the engine-room when the keel of the Superb first touched the sand.

There was another shock, less violent than the first. The faithful firemen relieved their engines all they could, and fled from the clouds of steam that announced the flooding of their quarters. But the huge wheels still revolved and drove the water-logged vessel further upon the bar, where she gradually settled on an almost level keel.

Serious enough, when everything is taken into consideration, but an accident that might have been infinitely worse. Not a life was lost, and only sundry bruises and sprains marked that senseless panic.

The officers of the fated steamer did their duty nobly after the first flurry was over, and though he could never recall how his eyes had become so beautifully blackened, Clerk Hoover was one of the most efficient in turning chaos to order.

Still, it was a full day before the situation was so completely understood that quiet again reigned over all. Then the passengers knew that though the damage to the boat was beyond repair, and the loss on freight must be serious, there was no danger to life.

The boat was firmly fixed on the bar, and though the waters were something above the level of the lower deck, the river was still falling, and thus there was not the slightest chance of the boat's being washed off into water deep enough to wholly sink.

At any hour another boat might come along

and take them off. After all, it was but a rude sort of frolic.

During the frightful confusion following the accident, the quarrel between Kyte Darley and Rufus Cramp was entirely lost sight of, even by the parties more immediately concerned, but with the rising of the sun those evil passions revived.

There are never lacking officious friends who delight in carrying words, looks and actions back and forth on all such occasions, and it quickly became evident to all that there was serious trouble brewing between the recent bosom friends.

Busy as he was, overseeing the emptying of the hold and caring for his freight, Captain Iles found time to note this, and with his customary blunt decision he sought out first one and then the other of the enemies, using more forcible than polite words to each.

Wrecked though the Superb was, she was still a boat, and he was still her captain. As long as such was the case, he must and would see that the peace was preserved.

"You kicked up the row, Mr. Cramp, from all I've heard. Maybe you had cause, maybe you didn't; I've got nothing to do with that part; but as sure as you burn powder or flash steel on board my vessel, just so sure will I clap you in irons, quick as the good Lord will let me."

And to Kyte Darley he was equally emphatic.

"You knew the rules and regulations that govern all on board the Superb, Mr. Darley, and you subscribed to them when you took passage. You can't break them and go scot free. Drop this quarrel, at least as long as you remain on my boat, or expect to take the consequences."

"The quarrel was none of my seeking, captain," coldly replied the gambler. "Any one present can tell you that I tried to get out of playing that fellow. He insisted, and even went so far as to vow he would brand me as a coward if I still declined his challenge. He accused me of cheating, and I only appealed to the bystanders for vindication, which they gave without a single silent or dissentient voice. Mr. Cramp repeated his charge, even after it was plainly disproved, and when I requested him, as one gentleman might another, to apologize or admit his mistake, he drew a knife on me and tried to kill me. Even then I held my hand, though I was more than entitled to kill him."

"I know—I have heard all that—and I admit you acted like a gentleman from first to last," admitted the captain, but adding doggedly: "But, all the same, I'll have no fighting here, right or not right, if I have to call up the crew and clap every mother's son of you into double irons!"

"I'll not crowd a row, be sure of that," was the cold retort. "But neither will I take a single step to avoid one. If that fellow will rush on his fate, I'll kill him like a dog, though you and all your crew stood at his back!"

"Then the quicker you reach dry land, the better for us all," hotly cried the captain. "Either give me the pledge I ask, or I'll land you, bag and baggage, even if I have to use force in doing it!"

"If the rest of your passengers prefer to land while waiting for another boat, I am perfectly willing to join them. If they stay, I stay as well, with or without your good will, captain," icily retorted Kyte Darley, turning on his heel without waiting for a reply.

Captain Iles was in earnest, but he hated to use force if it could by any means be avoided, and hurried as he was, he found time to solicit the interference of Miss Wellspring, believing as he did that she was the promised wife of one of the parties who longed to slay each other.

And here he met with another surprise, even more complete than the others. Instead of tears and wailings, instead of prayers that he might avert this frightful calamity, Miss Wellspring actually declined to interfere on one side or the other!

"To do so would be to lend a color of truth to the really absurd rumors which, I am both sorry and annoyed to say, I find are current on board," she said, coldly. "Neither gentleman is anything more to me than the merest acquaintance. I can scarcely call them friends, though, of course, I am very grateful for the service they rendered me."

Bewildered, stunned, Captain Iles beat a hasty retreat, yet more than ever was he determined that he would have no fighting on board.

"Let the hot-headed fools try it on, and I swear I'll blow them both through before they can take even the ghost of an aim!" he declared, to a little knot of his more prominent passengers. "Haven't I got trouble enough on my hands as it is? Good Lord!"

"Why can't they land, and have it out in regular fashion?" suggested one of his present auditors.

"Didn't I beg them to do so, almost on my two knees?" snorted the half-distracted official. "And didn't they both refuse? Of course they did! But I'll snub 'em short if they try to turn my decks into a shambles!"

"One word, captain," interposed the cold tones of Kyte Darley, as the gambler came near

enough to catch this speech. "I said I would go ashore when the rest of your passengers went. I simply declined to be marooned, when I am conscious of having committed no wrong."

"It's the other fellow who ought to be bundled ashore, neck and crop!" cried one excitable individual. "He kicked up the row, simply in hopes of saving his filthy money. Darley acted white, clean through!"

"I wish every infernal soul of you were on land!" exploded Iles, hardly conscious of his words, so intensely wrought up was he by the accident, an almost fatal one to his future hopes, he told himself.

"And why not?" cried the gentleman who had first hinted at the advisability of bringing off the duel on dry land. "It will give us a fine chance to stretch our legs, and at the same time leave the crew more room to re-stow the cargo. I'm in for landing—who else?"

The key-note was struck, and so it was quickly decided. After all, it would be a pleasant change in the programme, and some such shifting must eventually take place, anyhow.

The Superb could not complete her trip. The passengers must take the next boat that came up-river. It would be difficult, if not dangerous work to shift directly from one vessel to the other. And as at least a portion of the freight must be transferred to save it, the time could be passed much more agreeably on shore than in such crowded quarters as the second vessel could afford.

Glad enough to go to any trouble so that he might keep his decks free from blood, Captain Iles instantly set his men to work launching the big yawl from the upper deck, and there his responsibility ceased.

There were more than enough volunteers among the passengers to man both boats, for everybody, unless it might be the two prospective duelists, seemed to look upon the affair as a delightful jollification.

The shore furthest from the Superb was selected as the proper one on which to land, not alone because it was the pleasantest, being rather high, yet level and only partly covered with trees and undergrowth, while that nearest which the boat was stranded was low and sandy, covered as far as the eye could reach with dense willows and other growth, but because it was here alone that a steamboat could make a landing.

It took time to convey all the passengers to land, for willing hands are not always the most skillful, and though Rufus Cramp was among the first to reach shore, the duel did not come off at once.

Possibly of his own will, possibly because the oarsmen were determined not to be cheated out of their share of the sport, Kyte Darley was left until almost the last trip. And so, it happened, was Miss Wellspring. To others this might seem chance alone, but to Rufus Cramp it meant bitter treachery. And he mentally swore that he would have a revenge quite as sweet as all this was bitter.

Before the last boat-load left the side of the Superb, the black smoke of another vessel was seen far down the river, and haste was made to get the affair over before any chance of interruption could come to spoil sport.

Cool, and outwardly as calm as ever, Kyte Darley answered the cautious signal given him by his elected second, parting from Miss Wellspring with a bright smile and a whispered word. She nodded laughingly, as though she had not even the faintest idea of the impending tragedy.

"We've arranged everything, old fellow," uttered the second, with all the jovial nonchalance which seems inseparably connected with that peculiar office, as he drew Darley's arm through his and led him away. "It's a charming little spot for the work on hand, and the boys have arranged it so that the women can be kept out of sight, at the same time having a fair view of it all themselves. Of course you'll mark the fellow?"

"I'll kill him, unless he weakens enough to go down on his knees and eat the words he flung in my face last night," was the icy reply.

"I don't reckon there's any fears of that," laughed the other, unthinking just how bloody his choice of a word sounded. "I never saw a more vicious-looking fellow! You must have hit him awfully hard!"

"For all he's worth, and more too. But he would have it so, and of course I had to accommodate him."

"With four aces—I should say so!" laughed his second.

There was little time cut to waste, once the chosen spot was reached. All preliminaries had been adjusted beforehand, and a few terse words announced the terms of the duel.

The principals were to be placed ten paces apart, armed with a single dueling-pistol each, to fire at the word, in strict accordance with the code. Both principals bowed their acceptance of the terms, and quickly prepared for action.

There was really no time to lose. The heavy pantings of the approaching steamer were distinctly audible. At any moment some of the ladies might grow uneasy or suspicious, and put in an appearance to see why the men had deserted them in a body.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" came the low, yet painfully distinct words from the man who was to give the final word.

Both Kyte Darley and Rufus Cramp bowed assent.

But before another word could be spoken—before any one of all those present so much as suspected the coming of an intruder—a tall figure leaped into the cleared space, crying sharply:

"Drop those tools, you scoundrels! Dare to touch a trigger, and by the Lord of Hosts! I'll blow you through that second!"

Kyte Darley was standing furthest from the river, and the bold intruder had sprung through the underbrush a little to his right and rear, so that he had the duelists almost in line, and easy marks for him to cover with the heavy derringers that rose to a level as his stern voice rung out threateningly.

Kyte Darley whirled swiftly, but his hand, like that of Rufus Cramp, was still hanging by his side waiting for the word which would allow them to take aim. And a wild, gasping cry came from both men as they saw by whom they were confronted.

Mark Landrum—the Duke of Derringers!

A smile, fierce and triumphant, curled the smooth-shorn lips as this name and title echoed around the line of spectators. Piercer yet it grew as he saw how those two desperate men shrunk away, as he saw their eyes dilate wildly, as he noted them turn pale and tremble.

"Ay! the Duke of Derringers! Ready to make good his title, by sending a brace of bullets through your skulls, you craven curs! Drop those tools and to your knees! Ask pardon—not of me, but of the innocent girl whom you doomed to a cruel death in the waters of yonder river!"

A choking cry gurgled up in the throat of Rufus Cramp, as he let fall his weapon, his knees giving way beneath him, his nerveless body sinking in a heap to the ground, but with his horror-full eyes staring glassily at—not at the Duke of Derringers!

Close behind and a little to one side of the gentleman sport, now appeared a fair, pallid face with great brown eyes, gazing steadily upon the duelists, with something of reproach, with more of horror and dread.

Kyte Darley involuntarily staggered back, his steel nerves failing him for the first time in his life. And Rufus Cramp gasped huskily:

"Portia Wellspring! It's her ghost—haunt us!"

CHAPTER XVII.

OUT OF THE WATER INTO THE FRYING-PAN.

MARK LANDRUM was Marmaduke Barringer in disguise, just as Kyte Darley suspected him of being, and it is now time to give a little more fully the particular part he played in that night scene on the hurricane deck of the Superb.

It will be remembered that, failing to conquer Martin Tullar, chief of police, by arguments and appeals to his chivalry, the gentleman sport stooped to conquer after an altogether different fashion. And during that comparatively brief period when the chief lay with his face covered, chewing the cud of bitter defeat, together with a most uncomfortable gag, the Duke of Derringers was swiftly sacrificing his curling locks and cherished beard. This, with a change of clothes, completed his disguise, and with carpet-bag containing the jetty locks and other sundries, the gambler made his way to the steamer Superb, more than once fairly brushing shoulders with a policeman who was watching with all the eyes at his command for Marmaduke Barringer. He even passed between the two officers detailed to watch the steamer itself, and as the cap-sheaf, purposely gave Rufus Cramp that shock as the vessel began to move away by addressing him in his natural voice.

Believing that Rufus Cramp meant evil to Miss Portia Wellspring in some shape, and no longer attempting to deny the wild, foolish passion with which that lady had inspired him, Duke Barringer thought only of protecting her; he did not stop to ask himself how far the opportunity would be afforded him.

He had no means of knowing for certain that Mrs. Honor Magill had been foully dealt with, though his suspicions gradually grew stronger as time passed on without either of the ladies making their appearance at the table. He searched the register, but failed to discover her name.

His vigilance increased as Kyte Darley came aboard at Pullet's Landing, for he felt sure that there was a compact between the two men, despite the seemingly chance coming together. He tested his voice on the sleepy-eyed sport, partly to see if he would penetrate his disguise, but more to drive away suspicions that he was dogging them or trying to catch the purport of their earnest conversation.

But it is hardly worth while to go over each little point, one by one; in saying that Mark Landrum was the Duke of Derringers, self-sworn to foil the schemers; that partly by chance, partly by choice, he occupied the state-room adjoining that of the plotting pair; that he lost no opportunity in spying upon them by eye or ear; that on the one memorable occa-

sion, when the creaking of a hinge alarmed the conspirators, he neatly covered the slip by a pretended retreat, while in reality he remained within his room, eagerly listening to the words that followed; in saying that his first wish in arranging a tilt at cards with Kyte Darley was solely to keep him from playing the part assigned him in the—even yet—dimly suspected tragedy—enough is said to clear away whatever of mistiness there may be clinging about the past.

The first of those shadowy figures that followed Kyte Darley to the hurricane deck after he answered the red star signal from shore, was Duke Barringer: the second—although the Duke of Derringers neither heard nor saw aught of it, he was fated to feel its weight.

A tall man did approach Portia and Rufus, and there were harsh, if not exactly insulting words uttered; but that man was Kyte Darley, not Mark Landrum.

If those words failed to reach the ears of Duke Barringer, he was keen-eyed enough to note the actions which accompanied them. He saw Portia shrink back, only to be caught by Kyte Darley and flung against Rufus Cramp—and with an angry cry he leaped up from behind the yawl, pistols in hand. One spoke sharply, and only a sudden turn on the part of Rufus Cramp saved his brain at the expense of his cheek. The second shot was aimed at Kyte Darley, but just then the second shadow sprung cat-like against Barringer, striking up his pistol arm and causing the bullet to range high.

The two rascals reeled, as though death-stricken, but before the Duke of Derringers could reach them, they managed to hurl Portia Wellspring over the guards, her wild shriek being cut short as she plunged beneath the troubled waters.

And Duke Barringer, forgetting all else but a wild resolve to save the life of the woman he so insanely loved, or to meet the same fate with her, hurled himself rather than leaped over the guards.

He was too far from the low railing to see what was before him, and as he shot down head-first, his left shoulder grazed the swaying yawl, for the instant giving him the impression that his arm was literally torn from his body, and sending a sickening, suffocating sensation through his lungs and stomach as he sunk beneath the surface.

It was Providence more than his own skill or muscular effort that brought him in contact with the young lady below the surface. It was quite as much instinct as either love or reason that led him to grip her with his uninjured arm and cling to her tightly as they rose to the surface, tossing back and forth in the troubled wake of the steamer. And it was this same instinct that caused the Duke of Derringers to strike out toward the nearest shore; to hold the head of the senseless girl above the tumbling waves.

The shock had benumbed without actually disabling him. No bones were broken, but if he had not been a trained and expert swimmer, instead of saving the girl-woman, he would almost certainly have dragged her down to share death with him, before his scattered senses could recover themselves.

It was a curious adventure, all through, and the instantaneous manner in which the benumbed faculties of the gentleman sport were restored, formed not the least curious portion of it.

Not only were his bodily powers restored, but in the same breath he realized that both Portia Wellspring and himself had less to fear from the swiftly flowing waters than from their deadly, treacherous enemies aboard the Superb. And so, though the cry was already welling up in his throat, he choked it back as he looked around to see where the steamboat then was.

It was not so far away but that he could hear the excited voices on board, and make out the crowded shapes near the stern. He could not distinguish the words that were spoken, but their tones were quite sufficient to convince him that a rescue from that quarter meant death.

He saw that the boat was losing its headway, either to turn around or to simply hold its own, and he sunk lower in the water as he swam strongly toward shore.

There was as yet only the starlight to betray him, and this was baffled by the curling waves rushing down from the paddle-wheels. A few minutes more of that dire confusion, and—

After that first glance toward the shore, Duke kept his eyes fixed on the steamer, as the only point from whence danger could arise. The lapping of the waves and the murmur of the current filled his ears, so that he neither saw nor heard the low, phantom-like boat that shot silently, swiftly toward him from the shore on which had appeared that signal light.

"Stiddy! back water! I've got—the devil!" In the bow of the skiff a man was kneeling, peering intently ahead with his face as close to the water level as he could manage to get it, the more surely to distinguish a floating object.

Keen-eyed though he was, the Duke of Derringers swam so low and so skillfully in order to escape discovery from the steamer toward which his entire attention was turned, that the

lookout saw nothing of his head or motions, saw nothing save a ghastly-pale face, like that of a corpse. It was at this seeming corpse he stretched out his long arm and bony fingers as he hissing vented those words, and it was the sight of Duke Barringer's dark face so suddenly rising beside that white one, that wrested the oath from his startled lips.

"Take her—save her, if you be men!" panted the Duke of Derringers, not stopping to think how or why these men chanced to be so opportunely nigh at that hour.

"Is it you, boss?" muttered the fellow, recovering sufficiently from his scare to grasp and adroitly lift Portia Wellspring into the skiff. "We didn't look fer you, too!"

"Pull for shore—quick!" panted Barringer, catching hold of the bow and turning an anxious glance toward the steamer, where he could distinguish lights flitting to and fro on the lower deck. "Never mind me! Save the lady! They mustn't find—ha!"

Ample excuse for that ejaculation!

"Blazes! 'tain't the boss! It's a stranger!" savagely grated the man in the bow of the skiff, as his mates at the muffled oars took their first stroke.

He lifted a heavy, iron-tipped boat-hook from beside him, and aimed a vicious blow at the head of the swimmer the instant that he discovered his mistake. As the blow fell, Duke Barringer turned his face, too late to even fling up a hand to ward off or break the force of that dastard stroke!

A muffled cry that was hardly more than a groan, and then he sunk from sight below the agitated waters.

"What's up, Brack?" sharply demanded one of the men at the oars.

"Stranger—durned ef I know who he was!" growled the bowman, with a short, evil chuckle.

"Lay down to work, boys! He won't trouble us never no more, now I tell ye!"

"Somethin's gone crooked, then!" snapped the third man, half dropping his oar as though to move forward. "Ye durned fool! why fer didn't ye feeze to the critter, long enough to use your knife?"

"An' give him time fer to raise a yelp that mought open too many sharp eyes over yen' way?" nodding toward the boat where preparations were just beginning to lower the yawl. "Pull, ye sinners! They're gittin' the crates ready! 'Nother two minnits an' the hull river'll be bright as though the full sun was shinin' onto it!"

"Pull she am!" muttered the other, dropping back on his seat and dipping the muffled oars deep. "But, all the same, you didn't ort to let the critter slip with a whole hide! What'll the boss say?"

"'Tain't you he'll say it to, Gobble," tartly retorted the other, crouching low in the bow, one hand dropping on the face of the senseless maiden, ready to close over her lips in case she should recover sufficiently to utter a cry.

Now headed straight for the shore, the light skiff shot ahead under the skillfully handled oars. Deep the broad blades sunk, powerfully they tore through the water, yet emerging again with scarcely a ripple to betray their presence to the scores of eager eyes on board the Superb. Decidedly these midnight rovers were not novices on the water.

They could see the kindling fire-crates at the stern of the steamboat, where Captain Iles was directing the lowering of the yawl. They could note the steadily widening circle of light as the pitch-pine blazed up more vigorously, but they were still without that circle, and the shore was not a great distance away.

"Buckle down to it, lads!" hissed Brack, from the bow. "It's got to be clean work, the boss said! Ram her nose up on shore if the fire gains too fast on us, even if ye put it clean out o' j'int! Bend yer backbones—we've got to tote the ole shell up under kiver afore them cussed imps kin ketch a glimp!"

The sentence was broken by the forcible collision of the boat with the land, almost hurling him end over end out of the skiff. He snatched the still unconscious maiden up in his arms and hastened with her under cover of the shrubbery, while his two mates lifted the light skiff bodily out of the water, and followed after their comrade.

And not a moment too soon, either.

The stern of the Superb swung slightly around and the red light cast out by the fire-crates reached the shore they had just left.

The fellow called Brack chuckled softly, an expression of contempt on his hard features as he muttered:

"Ef we couldn't han'le ourselves better an' quicker then them roustabouts, we'd be spotted coons jest now. Eh, pards?"

"It'd be all right, on'y fer that stranger critter out yender," grumbled Gobble, an uneasy, troubled look in his little eyes as he peered through the bushes over the fire-lighted waters. "Ef you'd on'y done the job up clean, while ye was 'bout it!"

"Didn't I? Whar's the differ' atween a slit throat or a stuck gizzard an' a smashed head?"

"Ef you *did* smash it."

"Didn't I feel the bones give way when the

hook-'em-fast hit it? Didn't the critter sink like so much lead? Hes he come up an' hollered out what's goin' on? Ef he hes, then I hain't hearn him. An' I've got jes' as many ears as you hev, hain't I? Say?"

Still Gobble was not satisfied, though he could not find words to refute these triumphant assertions, rather than queries.

"Stick to the knife, I say! That's my motter! Stick to the knife. Stick with the knife. Send it home, an' draw it out with a twist o' the wrist. Then you know what you're doin'. Then you know that your work is done clean. Ain't no botchin' thar. That's my motter!"

"It's a motter as'll twist a rope fer that skinny thrapple o' yours, Gobble, ef you keep on livin' up to it," loftily retorted Brack. "It's a motter that tells mighty ugly tales, sometimes. It says they was somebody else nigh about when that critter croaked. It says whar is that critter now? It asks whar's the steel that made this hole with a twist as it come out? Whar's the han' that done the twistin'?"

"A croaker cain't answer, ef it does ax," doggedly muttered Gobble, not yet defeated. "In with a will. Out with a twist. No comin' back ag'in then. Stick to the knife, an' you're all right!"

"He hain't come back, hes he?" sniffed Brack, growing warm. "No, he hain't! He hain't hollered out who hit him, I reckon? Waal, I hain't hearn a holler o' that sort, not yit. Nur he won't do no talkin' ef he is ketched up a floater. Nur his head won't do no talkin' to hurt. Ef it says anythin', it'll tell of hitting a snag. Ef them on board knows him an' sees what the catfish'll leave when he's ketched, they'll look at his blessed head an' say he must 'a' hit on the guards or ag'in' the yawl or somethin' else. But they won't never think o' the hook-'em-fast, the way I used it."

"A motter is a motter, an' I stick by mine," doggedly persisted Gobble. "They ain't nothin' ekil to the knife, used the right way."

"Drap it, both o' ye!" sharply hissed the third man, more reticent than either of his companions. "Right or wrong, it's done, an' we cain't ondo it with idle chatter. Them in the yawl's comin' most nasty nigh to the shore! Ef they should ketch sight o' your ugly mugs s'ickin' out in the light, mebbe you'll both hear some uglier talkin'!"

Quieted if not convinced, the others screened their faces a little more with the leaves, peering out upon the reddened water, where the yawl was moving irregularly to and fro, in obedience to the hurried directions of Captain Iles. Now and again he fancied he caught sight of a white face or a floating figure, only to be undeceived as the waves changed forms.

As we have already seen, Captain Iles performed his work faithfully, even if success failed to reward his efforts, and only ceased to search the waters when fears became a settled conviction that the supposed assassin had either met his fate in the river, or else had escaped them by rapid and skillful swimming.

Reluctantly he gave his crew word to pull back to the steamer, which had drifted a few rods below the spot where the three men were lying under cover, with the still unconscious maiden beside them, looking so deathlike.

In silence the trio watched the process of securing the yawl and the getting of the steamer under way again. They saw the fire-crates emptied into the river, making the darkness seem doubly intense for a few minutes. They saw the Superb slowly gather headway and go puffing past their ambush. They watched her gleaming lights until the many became blended into the few, before they ventured to make a decided move.

Even then they seemed stirred into life and motion more by a low, gasping sound that came from the lips of the poor girl-woman, lying on the damp ground.

"I was hopin' she'd croaker fer good!" disgustedly muttered the as yet unnamed one of the trio, but whom we may as well introduce as "Link."

"Stick to the knife, an'—"

"Git out, you!" grated Brack, throwing Gobble aside as that sanguinary advocate of cold steel actually drew a long, vicious-looking blade from his person and moved toward the poor girl.

"She's got to be a croaker, hain't she? Then why not the surest way? Stick to the knife, an' it'll stick to you, I say!"

"Chuck him in the drink ef he don't 'have himself, Link!" grated Brack, bending over the young woman, whose great brown eyes were gazing bewilderedly into his hard features. "Comin' to, ain't ye, sorter, mum?" he added, with a leer that was evidently intended to represent benevolent sympathy.

"Save me! Those frightful men!" gasped poor Portia, hiding her eyes with her trembling hands.

"Sart'in we will, mum!" chuckled Brack, at the same time drawing a great rag of a handkerchief from his pocket and twisting it into thick folds. "Save ye so ye'll keep as long as the law 'll 'low, we will. Take ye safe home ag'in, from which ye run off when ye was clean gone crazy. Hol'up your head, honey—so!"

He lifted the poor girl to a sitting position, and before she could realize what was intended, he bound the dirty handkerchief tightly over her mouth, stifling the cry of terror that rose in her throat.

"Tie the two heels of her, Link, will you?" grinned the ruffian, as he flung some stout cords to his mates. Using others himself, he twisted Portia's hands behind her back, binding them with cruel force.

Helpless, almost swooning from combined weakness and terror, the poor girl-woman was suffered to drop back on the ground, bound beyond all possibility of escape. Brack motioned his fellows to accompany him a little apart without earshot of their captive, but still so they could keep an eye on her all the time.

"You want to know why I wouldn't let ye use the knife, Gobble?"

"Ef she's to croak, she cain't croak no surer way, I reckon!" that sanguinary worthy muttered, fingering his precious blade as his wolfish eyes wandered over the bound and helpless form beyond.

"Ef croakin' was all, that mought sarve as well as any other, I grant ye," retorted Brack, who was evidently inclined to feel his importance on this particular occasion.

"Ef they's any more, I reckon it's time we was knowin' to it," Link coldly interjected. "The boss chose you as lead man, but ef he didn't 'low we-uns was to do part o' the work, I don't reckon he'd 'a' tuck the trouble to pick us out."

"That's jes' what I wanted of you out here," confidentially replied Brack, settling himself as though for a lengthy talk. "Mebbe you tuck notice o' the gal's face? Mebbe you see that, ef it ain't, it mought well be the mist'ess, down yen' way?"

"Durn the face—it's the money I want!" growled Gobble.

"The money you'll hev jes' as soon's the job is clean done with, ole man. It hain't much more'n begun, as yit!"

"I kin finish it in a twinkle, ef ye say so, Brack," with another fond fumble at his ugly weapon.

"It cain't be did that way nohow, boys. When she croaks, it's got to be so's to look like natur' done the work," was the hasty reply.

"She's got to go to the plantation, an' be found thar when the right time comes. She's got to be another gal with the same face when our job's done with. She's got to be buried by the neighbors as knowed her for years. An' the name that's to be cut on her head-stone is got to be that of the woman she looks like jes' as much as she looks like her own nat'ral self!"

"Then the real mist'ess ain't comin' back no mo'?" slowly asked Link, his face grave and an eager light filling his dark eyes.

"Ef she comes back, it'll be as another woman. Ef she does, it'll be as a woman me an' you both'll know is dead an' kivered over with dirt. Ef she ever comes back to the plantation, boys, it'll be as that same gal as is layin' over yen' way!" chuckled Brack, in huge glee.

"Don't make no odds to me ef she don't never come back, jes' so I gits my money," muttered Gobble. "On'y I ain't goin' to stay 'round yere to wait fer her comin' back. It ain't so sure it'll all go off the way it's planned. I don't take no stock in sech mixed-up tricks! Gi' me the straight work. Stick to the knife; that's my motter!"

"Now you know why I fetched 'long the critters an' light waggin," added Brack, coming down to earth again. "To tote the gal back in a way that nobody cain't tell the sort o' freight we're kerryin' home. Gobble 'nd me'll do that part, while you, Link, kin make quick time with the current down-river to leave the skiff whar it b'longs."

"Time enough fer that, ef we waste a full hour yit, an' I hain't jes' sure I've got the hull thing through my pate yit. Mebbe you'll make it read a bit straighter, Brack?" slowly uttered the other.

"What is it ye don't see right cl'ar, Link?"

"Who the gal is. What we're to do with her. The hull lay-out!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A GALLANT KNIGHT AND HIS LADY FAIR.

If he was not given time to ward off or parry that vicious blow, Duke Barringer had time to see brutal murder in the eyes and face of the fellow who had dragged Portia Wellspring out of the water.

Here was another instance of good fortune sticking to a man, even after he was unable to help himself. The first stroke of Gobble and Link at the oars, made at the same time that he aimed his vicious blow, helped to deceive Brack. Instead of the iron-tipped "hook-'em-fast" striking the stranger fair and square on the top of his head, the blow was partially glancing, though still heavy enough to send Duke Barringer under the surface and convince the assassin that his full purpose was attained.

Only for the necessity of a hasty flight to shore, this error must have been discovered, all too soon for our friend in difficulties. Or, if

Brack had not been so intent on silencing the grumbings of Gobble, it is nearly certain that his night-trained eyes would have seen Duke Barringer rise to the surface again, only a few yards below the spot where he went under.

Only long enough for a quick gasp, for a single breath and a hasty glance about him; then the gentleman sport again vanished below the surface.

This time through his own free will. He could no longer doubt the truth: that in yielding Portia Wellspring up to these men in the phantom-like skiff, he had unconsciously played into the hands of Kyte Darley and Rufus Cramp. That there was death for him here, even more surely than if he suffered himself to be taken on board the Superb.

And he was in a wretched plight for making a fight against such long odds. The boat-hook had glanced, it is true, but his brain was whirling, buzzing, dancing dizzily under the shock. His scalp was torn, and his left shoulder seemed crushed where the heavy implement had fallen after glancing from the side of his head. He could use only his right hand and arm in diving and swimming under water for a spell.

When the Duke of Derringers was forced to come to the surface again for breath, he did so on his back, barely suffering his face to break water, drinking in the grateful air and cleansing his lungs with long, deep inspirations, at the same time making good use of his eyes.

He could see nothing of the skiff, but the Superb was before his eyes, sparks belching from her huge smokestack, her heavy paddlewheels sending a jarring throb through the water. The yawl was being lowered from her stern, and Duke Barringer knew that search was about to be made for him—for Portia, as he then believed.

His lips actually parted to send forth a warning shout to the captain and his crew, when a sudden, chilling fear closed them again.

Beyond a reasonable doubt, these men in the skiff were creatures of Kyte Darley. They had made that red star signal on shore. They had come out in their boat immediately after Darley answered their signal.

For what? What could it be but the precious freight which their skiff now contained? And he had delivered the poor child into their hands! Unconsciously, it is true; thinking only of preserving her life, of keeping her beyond reach of those dastardly schemers on the Superb; yet, despite all his good intentions, he had flung her right into the jaws of danger!

"I'll get her out again, or die with her in the attempt!" flashed through his brain on the instant, as he cautiously turned his head just sufficient to catch a glimpse of the shadowy craft.

It was speeding swiftly toward shore. Even were he to shout aloud the truth, long before the yawl could come to him, the rascals would be on land. If followed, would they hesitate to sacrifice the helpless maiden? That they were not afraid of murder, his own treatment afforded ample proof.

Sinking beneath the surface, Duke Barringer struck out toward the not distant shore, swimming with all the power he could summon. To his delight he found that his twice-injured left arm was not entirely disabled. He could make weak strokes with it, and each moment was helping to dispel that painful paralysis.

Twice more he was forced to rise for breath, each time allowing only the merest portion of his face to break the surface of the water, his lungs working double-tides, for he felt that moments were very precious just now.

The first time he caught a glimpse of the two men carrying their skiff out of the water. The second time nothing was to be seen in that direction, and his heart throbbed with suffocating haste as he thought that perhaps the rascals were even then hurrying off with their captive, bearing her whither? To what frightful fate?

This dread fear, even more than his superhuman exertions in his partially crippled state, caused the Duke of Derringers to lie for a few moments on the shore where he first touched it, looking more like a corpse than a living being.

The drawing nearer of the yawl lent him strength to glide swiftly out of the water alongside a stranded log of driftwood, keeping under its friendly shadow until the leafy bushes received his dripping form.

Again was he strongly tempted to hail the captain and demand that he follow after the men of the phantom skiff, and once more a vague something choked back the words before they could find exit. Contrary to his usual habit, the Duke of Derringers was guided almost purely by instinct at this stage of the game.

In truth, he was far from being himself just then. The shock of contact with the yawl; the savage blow from the boat-hook; the exhausting fight against water and suffocation; all these had in a measure benumbed his brain, leaving the brute predominant.

It was this instinct rather than reason, that led him to crawl off from shore, making a wide semi-circle up-stream, looking for some signs that might tell him the kidnappers had passed that way. It was instinct that led him to feel for his weapons, that he might not be without means with which to defend himself should he

chance upon the men of the skiff; but it was reason that caused him to pause abruptly as his fingers closed about his faithful derringers.

The painful numbness vanished that instant. His whirling brain grew steady and clear. From that moment he was the cool, shrewd, steel-nerved, far-sighted man of the world.

He remembered that two of his pet weapons had been used on board the Superb, and then either dropped on deck or into the water as he hurried himself over the stern guards. He had another brace, but they were rendered comparatively useless from long submersion in the water.

He felt for his little powder-flask, and a touch of the spring assured him that his powder was still dry. If he had time to spare, he could soon put his tools in working order—but had he?

"That's what I've got to find out!" he muttered below his breath, once more moving on.

Not many rods further, however, for he caught sight of a wagon and span of horses, perhaps a hundred yards back from the river.

"Theirs! it can be no less!" he panted, with a fierce joy filling his jetty eyes. "I'm in time, after all!"

Keenly as he gazed, the Duke of Derringers failed to detect any human beings about the wagon, and crouching under cover, where he could keep an eye on the horses as well as a lookout toward the river, he set about restoring his pistols to working order.

With the tools he carried for the purpose, it was brief work to draw the lead and wipe the barrels dry. Still briefer time was consumed in loading. Pressing the caps firmly home on the carefully dried nipples, the Duke of Derringers drew a long breath of relief.

"Duke's himself again! Now let those rascals chip in!"

Still there were no signs of the kidnappers, and Barringer began to feel serious uneasiness. What if he was mistaken? What if those men had naught to do with this team? What if they were only waiting until the search with the yawl should cease, to again take to their boat and row up or down the river with their prize?

By the tall dead tree which he had marked the moment he saw the men carrying their boat up the shore, Barringer knew that he was almost directly opposite the point at which they had sought cover. And yielding to those growing fears, he crept cautiously toward the river.

Fortune still favored him to a certain extent. Though shielded perfectly from view of those on the river, the three rascals were sitting in an exposed position on the other hand, and the Duke of Derringers quickly made out their phantom-like figures as they sat close together, Brack unfolding what he knew of the intricate plot involving the Wellspring millions. Foot by foot the Duke of Derringers crawled nearer their position, his black eyes searching in vain for their captive. Dense bushes hid her from his view, whether fortunately or otherwise time alone could determine.

He heard enough to give him relief on the main point: Portia was still living, and in no immediate danger of death, if that black-browed ruffian could be believed. And satisfied on this point, the Duke of Derringers tried to make sense of the fragments he could catch concerning the curious plot against Portia Wellspring.

Unluckily for his hopes, however, Brack had about finished his explanations when he reached a point close enough to hear his low tones.

"That's the programme, ye see, lads. This gal ain't Miss Marshy now, but by the time we tote her back home she will be. She'll croak, an' she'll be buried as Miss Marshy. The tombstone 'll say she's Miss Marshy. An' them as knows it's all a bloomin' lie, 'll never say so out loud. 'Cause why: they's money as tells 'em to shet trap! Money in han', an' more money in the futur'! Fer sech monstrous big secrets as these ain't to be wiped out o' mind with no one payin'. Nur two. Nur three. No, sir!"

"Waal, the boat's gone, an' I reckon it's time we was pullin' out, too," muttered Link, rising to his feet. "Ef they ain't no more fer me to do jes' now, reckon I'd best be moggin' long with the skiff. Eh?"

"Reckon, mebbe. We'll len' ye a han' to git it in the drink, an' then I'll tote the gal back to the team. It's a right smart drive, an' we want to beat the sun," quoth Brack, rising together with Gobble.

As they moved toward the bushes in which the skiff was hidden, the Duke of Derringers cautiously retreated, hastening back to the horses and wagon, dropping down under cover at a point where he could fully command the situation when the two ruffians should arrive with their precious burden.

Several minutes elapsed before they were heard coming in that direction, for they evidently waited to see their comrade well off on his journey. And the Duke of Derringers breathlessly watched them place their helpless prisoner into the wagon, rising to his feet as they set about carefully covering her from view with straw and a blanket.

"Just take a peep into the mouths of these pretty barkers, won't you, my fine lads?" he

said, sharply, covering the thoroughly startled rascals. "What do you think of their teeth?"

"The stranger!" gasped Brack, shrinking back, one hand uplifted as though to stop the lead he plainly expected.

"I knowed it! Stick to the knife! It don't never fool ye!" panted Gobble, crouching low and mechanically flashing forth his beloved blade. "Down him, Brack! Stick to the—"

He sprung forward, panther-like, only to drop in a quivering heap as one of the pistols exploded, driving the ounce ball through and through his skull. And like an echo came the second report, shattering the raised elbow of his companion.

Howling with pain, Brack reeled against the wheel, to be flung at full length as the frightened horses started as far as their tethers would permit. A single glance assured Barringer that they could not break away, and then he pounced upon the crippled wretch, deftly robbing him of all weapons, rolling him over on his face and binding his hands and feet with strips cut and torn from his own garments.

This done, Duke hastened to look after Portia. To his dismay he found her in a lifeless swoon, so closely resembling death that it was not until he had set her hands and feet at liberty, not until he had felt and heard her heart faintly throbbing, that his fears began to subside. Nor did he cease his efforts to restore her senses until perfect success rewarded him.

Never mind just what words escaped his lips in those first moments. If a gambler, Duke Barringer was still human. If he could kill in time of need, he could also love. And love as madly, as hotly, as foolishly as the veriest knight of olden days.

And Portia? Startled, bewildered, fearful at first as she vainly sought to recall all that had transpired, she was not so terribly alarmed after a little. She seemed to recognize this tall man as a true friend, though she did shrink a little from his ardent murmurings after the first bewilderment began to fade away.

And the Duke of Derringers, with a tact that would not have disgraced that same armored knight of the long ago, choked back the long-pent-up passion, and tried his utmost to make her feel at ease.

In as brief speech as he could command, he made known the main facts, begging her to trust him as a true friend until he could prove himself such by his actions. And as he spoke thus, he led the horses a few rods away, hitching them again as he turned back to say a few parting words to the groaning wretch whom a just retribution had overtaken in the height of his brutal triumph.

"You won't perish, you rascal, richly as you deserve death. The fellow you sent off in the skiff will doubtless come back to look for you when he fails to find you at the plantation. Until then, you can count up how much you'll make by this bit of devilry."

"Don't leave me here, tied like a hog!" groaned the wretch. "It's killin' me—this arm! Let me go loose—I'm dyin', anyway!"

"No such good luck! There's a halter waiting for you, and it's almost near enough for me to count the strands. Good-night! I'm off!"

It was prudence rather than heartlessness that hurried the Duke of Derringers back to the wagon. He knew that the reports of his derringers would float far on that still night. They might bring Link back to investigate. True, he was but a single man, but he might have numerous friends within reach, whom he could induce to follow and try to rectify the mistake. And what he would have laughed at with only himself to care for, was to be avoided now that Portia was involved.

It was difficult, even dangerous traveling through the night, for however well he might be acquainted with the actual shore of the river, and the country immediately surrounding the towns, Duke was little better than lost while the gloom enveloped them. And yet, though only certain that they were heading up-stream, following a dimly-seen, poorly-kept road, there was a peculiar pleasure found in that journey such as neither of the occupants of that wagon had ever before experienced.

Before the day dawned, much that had puzzled Barringer was made tolerably clear. He learned who "Miss Marshy" was, and began to see how the Wellspring millions could be won by the substitution of a false for the true heiress, for Portia said that, though she had never met her in the flesh, Marcia Wellspring, her cousin, was declared by others to be her perfect image in face, form and even voice!

And on his part, Duke had much to relate that was of absorbing interest to his one auditor. He frankly told her his name and occupation, induced to the last confession, perhaps, because he knew that the name alone would tell her the rest. He told how curiously he gained his first inkling of the plot against her, and how he sought to frustrate it. He told how he had been accused by Rufus Cramp, and even arrested on that vile charge. He smoothed over the manner of his escape, and hurried on to what discoveries he had made on board the Superb.

He declared his belief that the real Marcia Wellspring had been smuggled on board in dis-

guise; that the "invalid" whom Kyte Darley so carefully assisted on board, introducing him as "Wilfred Bangs," was none other than Marcia Wellspring in male clothing, with face whitened and brows blackened, to match her false hair.

This conclusion was partly reached by the words he had caught from Brack, from ambush, partly from what he had heard and seen on board the Superb, although at the time he had failed to comprehend the truth, through his complete ignorance of Marcia Wellspring and her marvelous likeness to Portia.

It was at her door that Kyte Darley had paused for an instant after answering the signal from shore. She it must be who had struck up his arm and shoved him forward when he sought to rescue Portia.

In these mutual confidences the rest of the night passed, and then by the light of day Duke Barringer strove to settle on their precise whereabouts. A little to his dismay he saw that they were far from the river-bank; how far he had no means of knowing. But before long his quick wits cleared away the clouds.

He recalled the lay of the ground above Paullet's Landing, and knew now that this road, while leaving the river, was still carrying them in the proper direction. A long, broad bend in the river was thus cut off.

"It may be—thanks to the glorious slowness of the Superb—that we can even yet intercept her!" he laughed, lightly.

"I never wish to see that boat again!" shivered Portia, moving a little nearer her protector. "Those terrible wretches!"

"I think I can persuade them to keep the peace," smiled Barringer, but with a red light leaping into his momentarily averted eyes.

"Only for poor father, I would rather wait a week for another boat!"

And thereupon Duke set about the pleasant task of consolation. If part of the plot was built on lies, why not the whole structure? For his part, he felt positive that Mr. Wellspring was not ill, had not been ill at all! And ere long Portia came to believe just as Duke did.

It was a wonderfully pleasant ride, all things considered, and it was a ride that deserves a fuller description than can be afforded here. It would be a bright oasis in a desert; a sunny leaf in this sin-burdened record, but it must be turned over rapidly.

The ride was not without its adventures. Twice they met men who respectfully greeted Portia as her cousin! And at the little cabin where they were forced to stop for supper, again she was addressed as Marcia Wellspring, and curiously questioned as to her destination, while of course the Duke of Derringers came in for his full share of curiosity.

Defly he parried this, and by the same skill he learned much concerning the lay of the ground before them, which stood them in good stead when their journey was once more renewed. For renewed it was, though they were hospitably solicited to remain for the night.

Duke was inwardly willing enough, but Portia, despite the arguments he had used with such effect that day, was eager to go on without delay until a point could be reached from whence they might catch the first upward-bound boat. And, though the journey would be shortened in hours, it would still be just as many miles to be passed in close company, so Duke was quite content to agree with her haste, after all.

The old adage of the more haste, the less speed, was exemplified in their case, however, for in the darkness one of their jaded animals lamed itself by stepping into a hole, shortly afterward giving completely out.

When this fact was proven beyond the shade of a doubt, Barringer turned the crippled beast loose, stripped off the harness and folded the blankets into a rude pillion, then mounted the sound horse. Portia was seated behind him, one arm gently clasping his round waist, her tender cheek touching his shoulder at times.

And so they journeyed on through the second night, mile after mile.

Truly, it was not such an unpleasant trip, all things considered! Duke was positive of this. He even went so far as to declare that he had never enjoyed himself a tenth part as much in all his life before! And as he turned his head to confidentially utter this assertion, the stars gave light enough to betray the soft blush that suffused the smooth cheeks beneath his gaze.

Well, the day dawned at last, and with a faint sigh of which he was hardly conscious, Duke declared that they were again drawing near the river. Portia was delighted with the information, and her anxiety deepened again. So much time lost! If it should be true, about her father! If they were forced to wait long for another boat!

"Not long—see!" and with a degree of reluctance which he would not even admit in his own heart, Duke pointed far away down the river to a dim line of smoke that lay along the tree-tops. "A boat is coming, now. It will be abreast us before noon. It will stop at our signal, and then—"

Again a faint sigh parted his lips. Portia glanced shyly into his darkly handsome face, her lips parting to speak. But her eyes drooped and the words came not as his gaze suddenly

dropped to her face. After all, perhaps it was just as well. Her vivid blush spoke quite as plainly as her tongue would have done; perhaps even plainer.

That smoke was the same signal that warned the passengers of the Superb to hasten up their arrangements for the duel between Kyte Darley and Rufus Cramp. It was the smoke that led Duke Barringer to leave the high road and cut across lots to make sure of time enough to signal for a landing. And that smoke it was that led him straight to the spot where the two rogues were preparing to take each other's lives, not for money or injured honor, but for the love of Marcia Wellspring!

And as he heard the sound of voices, Duke slipped from his horse, and ran on in advance to make his dramatic appearance. And fearing, she hardly knew what, for him, Portia Wellspring hastily followed after.

CHAPTER XIX.

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

"Who is taking my name in vain? Who calls on Portia Wellspring?"

Clear and distinct came the voice, musical in tones, with just a trace of coquetry about it. And defly slipping through the undergrowth, passing the line of surprised and bewildered men, the Miss Wellspring whom they had rowed from the sunken Superb, entered the little clear space, stopping short as though amazed at what met her eyes.

Little wonder!

Rufus Cramp, half-lying, half-crouching on the ground, a pistol by his side, shivering all over with superstitious horror, one quivering hand pointing toward the pale, beautiful face from which he shrunk, yet from which he was unable to avert his widely-dilated eyes.

Kyte Darley, every trace of color driven from his face, but which might have been a mask of marble for all the emotion to be read therein, facing the man who held him under a derringer muzzle. Only the fact of his black eyes being riveted on the face of the woman who stood just beyond the Duke of Derringers, instead of on the man who had him covered, told how greatly shaken his nerves were in reality.

Miss Wellspring gazed from one face to another with a growing trouble in her lovely face. Her red lips faded just a thought. The pupils of her great brown eyes shrunk a little, and her voice was less full and steady as she murmured:

"What does it all mean? Oh! it cannot be! Say that you are not quarreling—that you have not shot each other on my account!"

The Duke of Derringers laughed, cold and disagreeably, crying:

"A miracle! Wilfred Bangs restored to perfect health, and metamorphosed into a woman! Your humble servant, Miss Marcia Wellspring!"

With a start and a stare the woman turned toward the speaker, one hand slowly passing across her eyes as though to clear her vision. A puzzled light shone in her great brown orbs. But only for an instant.

She shrunk back just a trifle, a look of fear coming into her face. It rung out in her voice, though mingling with defiance and hatred.

"That man! Arrest him! He tried to murder me! He sought to cast me overboard, and—"

She seemed for the first time to see her double, and in her surprise to forget all else. She started forward with a little cry, her hands extended, her lovely face filling with wonder and delight.

"Marcia! my dear cousin! How came you here?"

"You are Marcia, I am Portia Wellspring!" impulsively cried the girl-woman who had borne the Duke of Derringers company to the spot, a flush of hot indignation completing the marvelous resemblance.

"As I stand ready to take oath, and to prove against all who dare deny!" coldly yet resolutely cried the gentleman sport, the weapon left free by the collapse of Rufus Cramp, sweeping the startled circle, even while with the other he held Kyte Darley harmless.

It was a bold game, well-nigh desperate, but the stakes were far too great to be given up without straining every nerve to win. And the woman who had so daringly taken the place of the rightful heiress, was not yet conquered.

"I don't understand—what do you mean?" she murmured, shrinking timidly back from her double, only to as quickly recover and assume the offensive. "How dare you, Marcia! Are you indeed as evil-minded as they sought to make us believe? Ha! I see! You are in league with that miserable wretch who tried to murder me! Perhaps that murder was but part of a cunning plot—a daring scheme to bring you forward as me! To lay claim to the Wellspring millions!"

Even the Duke of Derringers was amazed and not a little startled by this flight of daring on the part of one whom he believed would be overwhelmed with confusion and fear at the first sight of Portia's face. Least of all did he think any of the schemers would be bold and original enough to follow a line like this; to actually charge the

rightful heiress with the very crime they were working against her.

Even more completely was Portia taken aback, though righteous indignation quickly came to her assistance. Pale as death, but with her eyes glowing, she moved forward and confronted her cousin.

"I am Portia Wellspring. You are my cousin Marcia, the daughter of my uncle, Remus Wellspring. I know this by your startling resemblance to myself, in face, figure and even voice. I have been warned against you, as being wicked and wholly without principle, but never did I think to see those warnings so fully verified as now! Impostor!"

During this sharp interchange, Kyte Darley was doing some rapid thinking. When he saw and recognized both Duke Barringer and Portia Wellspring, both of whom he had counted as dead and food for fishes, the blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins. And when Rufus Cramp—the miserable cur—gave way to superstitious fears and gasped out the name of the heiress, he felt that all was lost beyond recovery. But the bold diversion made by Marcia, the admirable tact she displayed in at once placing the enemy on the defensive, in a measure restored his shaken audacity.

He knew that the Duke of Derringers could not be caught off his guard enough to afford him even a snap shot with the weapon that still hung by his side. He knew that the slightest movement might bring an ounce of lead crashing through his brain, but by the time that Portia Wellspring started forward to confront the impostor, he was prepared to run this risk. He purposely uttered an exclamation that assured him the Duke of Derringers must see his action, then suffered the pistol to drop from his hand upon the ground.

"Marcia—my love!" he cried, starting forward a pace, both hands extended toward Portia, his handsome face glowing with mingled surprise and deep devotion. "How came you here, so far from home?"

A short, mocking laugh parted the red lips of the beautiful impostor as Portia shrunk involuntarily away from the gambler.

"Have you carefully counted the cost, Marcia? Are you prepared to sacrifice your lover, as well as your cousin, for the sake of the Wellspring millions? Bah!" with sudden anger, with withering contempt. "You beautiful wretch! You shameless impostor!"

"What, Marcia! not one word for me?" brokenly uttered Darley, never in all his life playing a desperate card so perfectly. "Not—"

"Touch her, you cur!" grated the Duke of Derringers, a single leap carrying him between the gambler and the bewildered girl. "Dare to lay but the tip of a finger on this angel, and I'll send you howling home to Tophet!"

"Hold back! Fair play! Let the ladies settle it between them!" came from different points around the central group.

"There is nothing to settle," haughtily exclaimed the impostor, as she drew up her perfect figure with an air of scorn. "I cannot give that bold creature in charge, because the same blood runs in both our veins. I can only charitably hope that she has suddenly been overtaken by insanity! Surely no sane woman would have the audacity to attempt such a barefaced imposition, right in the face of those who have known me as a fellow passenger all the way from New Orleans!"

"And Wilfred Bangs, Miss Marcia?" asked Barringer, with a laugh.

"As for you," one slender finger pointing her words, "I charge you with attempted murder, night before last! I charge you with trying to cast me over the guards into the river! With shooting these two friends who interfered to save my life! Gentlemen!" she added, impetuously, glancing swiftly around the startled, bewildered faces, "is there no one present man enough to arrest that merciless villain?"

"Duke, I want you!"

A short, stoutly-built man pressed his way into the circle, a hard, resolute expression on his florid face, a cocked revolver in one hand and the other grasping a pair of handcuffs.

Martin Tullar, chief of police, had run his prey down at last!

"Portia! my darling child!" cried a shrill, quavering voice at almost the same instant, and Mrs. Magill rushed through the bushes, a glad cry trembling upon her lips as she caught sight of Marcia Wellspring.

"Aunt Honor! Thank Heaven!" cried Portia, feeling that at last her trials must be at an end, for surely her loving guardian and lifelong companion would have no difficulty in recognizing the real from the false.

"Aunt Honor!" echoed Marcia, playing every point for all they were worth. "I am so glad! Send that awful creature away! She is trying to rob me of my very name! She says she is your Portia! She—Marcia!"

In open-eyed and open-mouthed dismay the poor old lady gazed from one face to the other. Surely she was dreaming! Surely there could not be two Portias before her! And she actually pinched her own arm in the vague idea of waking herself—and screamed aloud with pain.

Hardly less amazed was the Duke of Derrin-

gers, for not one of the party in their excitement had noticed the landing of the steamer, and it seemed as though the worthy chief had actually dropped from the skies, despite his uniform and all too substantial corporation!

"Dead or alive, Duke!" harshly muttered the officer, as he saw the gentleman sport mechanically cover him with one pistol. "Shoot me, and my deputies will take you, one way or the other. Your hands, please!"

"I won't kick, if you'll wait until we can see this matter settled!" hurriedly muttered Barringer, as he glanced toward Aunt Honor, who just then came up. "I swear I'll not try to give you the double."

"I trusted you once, and what came of it?" grimly retorted the chief, an ugly light glowing in his eyes. "I'll run no chances this trip, if I can help it. Once more—your hands!"

"Not without you—"

"You won't, eh?" cried Tullar, in savage exultation as his deputies, two stout fellows, caught the gambler from behind, wrenching his hands up and back, tripping him heavily to the ground, falling upon him and holding him helpless while their chief snapped the irons about his wrists, then leaped up and faced the startled crowd with cocked and ready pistol as he cried sternly: "I arrest this man in the name of the law, and I'll blow the first man through that lifts a finger to interfere with me in my sworn duty!"

Only one in all that crowd made a move or uttered a word of sympathy. Only one—Portia Wellspring rushed forward as the officers raised the manacled, sorely-shaken captive to his feet, and flung her arms about the neck of the accused, sobbing bitterly, tenderly:

"It is for me—all for me that you suffer this shame, my love!"

"And this is the—the thing that dared to lay claim to my name!" cried Marcia, with intense scorn as she turned toward the bewildered Aunt Honor. "Come, aunty, let us go. It makes me disgusted with my own face and form just to witness such conduct in my double!"

But Aunt Honor stood as though rooted to the spot, gazing first at one face, then at the other, unable for the life of her to decide which one was really her beloved charge.

Captive, disgraced though he was in the eyes of all save himself and this pure spirit, Duke Barringer would not have exchanged places at that moment with the richest man on all the earth! He saw that, hysterical though Miss Wellspring plainly was, those last words came direct from her heart, drawn thence by the bitter knowledge that all this humiliation and danger came to him through his manly defense of her alone. And he knew, too, that she would never retract that impulsive confession, though, under less exacting circumstances, months and years might have passed before he could have won them from her coy lips.

Unheeding the rude hands upon him, unthinking of the many eyes that were noting every word and action, Duke bent and pressed his lips to hers, then whispered bravely—for it does require bravery of no ordinary sort to banish the one who has just avowed her love—to her:

"Go, darling! Go with your aunt. Keep close beside her. Don't let that beautiful serpent get the start of you. Surely you can think of some proof that will convince her you are the right Portia?"

It was his commands, and Portia immediately obeyed them. She at once moved over to where Aunt Honor stood rooted in utter bewilderment, and caught her trembling hand, saying:

"Look at me, aunty. Gaze direct into my eyes and try to look down into my heart. You know I am your Portia. You know that this woman is a vile impostor! She is Marcia Wellspring, daughter of Remus. Look well at us both. Read our minds, if you can. Decide which is the true, which the false Portia!"

Breatheless the Duke of Derringers watched and listened, but not for long. Martin Tullar had long brooded over his shameful defeat at the hands of this man, and though he had voluntarily withdrawn the parole he had granted, of his own volition, he grew to believe that Duke Barringer had bitterly wronged him, both as a man and an officer, by foully betraying the trust he had reposed in his pledged word.

It was nearly night before he had been released, by the coming of a chambermaid to prepare the room for another occupant, and then the Superb was far beyond his reach. He could only wait for the next boat, fully four-and-twenty hours later, before he could make chase. Chase he would, though it led him twice around the world, he mentally vowed. He took the boat, fully armed at all points, and accompanied by two allies who were sworn to take or kill the Duke of Derringers should Martin Tullar fail to capture him unaided. Thanks to the delays which befell the Superb, the chase had been far less protracted than he had dared hope. Success had rewarded his efforts, and now his first wish was for a speedy return to New Orleans where his revenge would be complete.

"I came after you alone, Duke," he said, as his deputies forced the prisoner away from the crowd and toward the river-bank. "I've got

my meat, and I'll run no chances of losing it. I treated you white, down home, and you covered me with dirt. Now—I'm going to think more how to keep you fast, than of your comfort or high-toned feelings!"

In silence, knowing how worse than vain would be any effort on his part to free himself, the Duke of Derringers was led on board the vessel which was tied up but a little ways below where the "pleasure party" had landed. Captain Hles was in busy consultation with the officers of the boat, but busy as he was he had time to bestow a black scowl on the prisoner as he was led through the office by his captors.

"Keep him tight, officer!" he cried, sharply. "I've got a charge to enter against him: assault with murderous intent!"

"After I have settled old scores, captain," laughed Tullar, passing on, stowing away his prisoner in his own state-room.

"A mighty few words will settle them, chief," quietly uttered the Duke of Derringers, who had striven hard to collect his resources. "The ladies I am accused of assaulting, are outside, and they can swear to my innocence. As I told you before, Rufe Cramp put up that job on them, and capped it by trying to murder the young lady on board the Superb. Only for me, he would have succeeded. She can tell you this!"

"I'm taking you back on an altogether different charge, Duke," the chief laughed, grimly. "I'm chief witness against you, if you must know! I swore I'd never rest until I got even, you remember?"

"Then it is all spite-work? If you will only listen to my story, chief! If you will only see how important it is that I should be free to match those two devils, Kyte Darley and Rufus Cramp! If you will only arrest them on a charge of—"

"Out of my range, Duke," was the blunt response. "And I wouldn't stretch a single point to save your neck. I've got it in for you bad!"

"There's a boat coming down-river, chief!" cried one of his men, rushing down from deck in hot haste.

"Good enough!" with a hard laugh. "See about stopping her, and we'll take passage back home."

The Duke was half-distracted with fears on account of Portia Wellspring, and begged Tullar to arrest Kyte and Cramp, swearing that he would see that he was justified in the end. This being refused, he implored time enough at least for an interview with Portia, thinking to persuade her to either return to New Orleans, or at least refuse to take the same boat with the dangerous schemers.

Even this the chief was reluctant to grant, but finally he agreed to find Miss Wellspring and make known the request for an interview. And leaving Duke in charge of his deputies, with strict orders to blow his brains out the very first sign of an attempted escape, he left the state-room and passed out on the forward guards.

By this time the majority of the persons ashore had come down to the new boat, the most of them eager to make arrangements for continuing their journey up the river on her. Among these were the rival claimants to the name of Portia, and the still thoroughly bewildered Mrs. Magill.

Close behind them followed Kyte Darley and Rufus Cramp, arm in arm, just as though they had not but an hour before stood up to take each other's life. In this crisis, they could not afford to pursue their quarrel. They would need all their energies to avert the utter ruin that threatened to overwhelm them and their plot for the Wellspring millions.

Through the curious crowd, down the long cabin to its after extremity, the three women passed, still followed by the two men. And Kyte Darley, with a cold, hard glance at the men who ventured to follow them this far, drew the sliding doors close behind him.

Portia shivered as she noted this action, but even against such tremendous odds she did not shrink. Firm in the consciousness of right, she fought her battle, striving to clear the befogged brain of Aunt Honor, only to be deftly countered by Marcia at every point.

In silence the two men watched the struggle, Rufus Cramp still too hardly shaken to be of any service, Kyte Darley coolly waiting the proper moment for interference. Time passed, and still he was silent, but then Marcia abruptly appealed to him as a gentleman.

"You can decide all, if you will, sir," she added, falling back.

"It's all up, Marcia," he muttered, addressing Portia. "I can't conceive what you are trying to win, but I won't tell a lie even for you, now you have denied me. You are Marcia Wellspring, daughter of Remus!"

The vile lie was still lingering on his lips when the doors suddenly slid back to admit several men, whose hands held revolvers, covering the astonished conspirators, while their leader sternly cried:

"You are our prisoners, Kyte Darley and Rufus Cramp! Resist and so much the worse for you both!"

"What do you mean, fellow?" angrily snarled Kyte.

"That the game's up, and Silas Cramp has confessed everything!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE FIGHT WON AND LOST.

RUFUS CRAMP sunk to the floor, weak and unstrung as he had been when he first caught sight of two faces, the owners of which he believed his arm had helped to hurl down to death.

And Kyte Darley showed signs of breaking down, this blow was so totally unexpected. In his intense interest in the battle between the false and the rightful heiress, he had unnoticed the noise that accompanied the landing of the steamer from up the river, and thus it seemed that these officers must have dropped from the clouds or reached the scene by some other miraculous means.

Still he showed himself of no ordinary metal, and haughtily frowned upon the officers as he sternly demanded:

"By what right do you intrude here? I know nothing of Silas Cramp, nothing of any game or confession!"

"I'd stick to the same, if I was you, Mr. Darley," laughed the officer, yet never once relaxing his guard, never once lessening the advantage he and his fellows held over the plotters. "I don't want to do you any particular harm. I want to turn you over to those who sent me after you, safe and sound if I can. And if a little arguing will help to bring about a better understanding between you and I, so be it! But at the same time, you must remember that you are under arrest, and rather than let you slip through our fingers, we'll fill you too full of lead to run without steam power!"

"This gentleman is my friend," sharply uttered Marcia, facing this fresh peril as boldly as she had that one of an hour earlier. "Of what crime dare you accuse him?"

"Of conspiring with Silas Cramp and his son, Rufus, to poison Romulus Wellspring, and—"

"My father!" gasped Portia, starting forward with an agonized cry.

"He is well—he is better, Miss—"

Marcia felt that all was lost, and with a cat-like leap she was beside Kyte Darley, swiftly muttering:

"Flee—for life, my darling! I'll check them until—"

"Not without you, Marcia!" he interposed; one arm closing about her waist while his right hand clutched a weapon.

Not to use it. The officers were on guard, and by that one moment spent in trying to secure the woman whom he loved more than he did his own life, Kyte Darley lost his last chance of escape. He was disarmed and twisted to the floor, when a sharp snap told that the irons were upon his wrists.

Marcia was hurled rudely aside in the struggle. She fell against a chair, rising with a little rill of blood marking her temple and cheek, pale now as that of a corpse. Aunt Honor, still honestly bewildered as to which was Portia, moved toward her with a little cry as the girl-woman fell, only to shrink back as Marcia repulsed her with a hard, reckless laugh.

"Back, you old fool! Yonder is your tender pet, your meek Portia, your sinless ewe lamb! I—I am Marcia Wellspring!"

"Don't—don't weaken, for Heaven's sake!" groaned Rufus Cramp, who was being ironed without making the slightest resistance.

Like a beautiful fury Marcia turned upon the craven wretch.

"You pitiful cur! Only for you—only to make your punishment the surer—I would lock my lips and never breathe a word though they tore me limb from limb! If you had shown one particle of pluck! If you had shown yourself even the shadow of a man! We might still have a chance to win the fight; but as it is—"

"I must remind you, ma'am, that whatever you say now, will be repeated at your trial," hastily interposed the chief officer.

Marcia turned from Cramp, smiling, bowing mockingly.

"So I wish may prove the case, Mr. Officer. I have fought the fight the best I knew how. I have been defeated, and unlike yonder miserable craven, I'll die firing my guns to the last!"

"I'd hate terribly to have to—to put you in irons, ma'am!"

"And I will glory in them, for you have already placed irons on my soul, my life, my all," cried Marcia, turning her great brown eyes upon Kyte Darley, no longer disguising her mad, idolatrous love for the gambler. "I will not fare better than my love does; only—I ask it as a favor—let me make confession while my hands are as free as my tongue!"

She hardly waited for permission, but turned toward Portia and Aunt Honor, speaking with feverish rapidity:

"I tried to steal your name, for which I am willing to beg your pardon, Portia Wellspring. I helped to plot your death, for which I expect to pay the full penalty exacted by law. I am only sorry that our efforts were not wholly successful!"

"It is a lie!" cried Rufus Cramp, frantically, only to be choked down and gagged by his captors.

"I felt—I still feel—that I was simply fighting for my own," resumed Marcia, after one scornful glance toward the craven. "Your father cheated my father out of his all, adding it to his own great store. It was a robbery even more daring than this fight of ours for the Wellspring millions, in all save the risk of life. There the coward drop showed itself! Romulus Wellspring was careful to hide beneath the cloak of the law, while none the less a thief, robber, and, in the end, a murderer! For my father was murdered! Murdered by his twin-brother, even as my mother was murdered before him, by the same fratricidal hand!"

"Aunt Honor—take me away!" sobbed Portia, shrinking from those blazing eyes, from those terrible words.

"And you are the heiress to all these millions? You—poor, pitiful, weak, trembling creature!" cried Marcia, her voice full of scorn. "Bah! it was hardly worth while to plot against such a sawdust doll!"

She turned away from the trembling girl, facing Rufus Cramp. And if her voice was full of contempt before, it expressed the utmost loathing now.

"You first whispered this wild plot to me, Rufus Cramp, in the days when I was fool enough to imagine that I could learn to love you as you prayed and pleaded that I might. You told me what sweet revenge I might have on the branch of the family that had so utterly ruined us. You were so proud of the daring scheme, claiming all the credit for it as long as all seemed to go well, only to break down the instant matters took a turn for the worse.

"I don't say this to reproach you with the ruin which, more than any one thing else, your cowardice has brought upon us all. I am willing to pay the full penalty for defeat, knowing that I will suffer in common with the man I love, the man whom I have loved from the day of our first meeting!

"I want to fairly open your eyes, to show you how thoroughly you have been befooled, Rufus Cramp! For a full year I have been a wife—and this is my darling husband!" springing to the side of Kyte Darley, and clasping him about the neck with her white arms, recklessly, almost fiercely pressing kisses upon his lips and face.

Rufus Cramp turned purple with suffocating rage. He could see it all, now! Truly he was being punished, for, as much as lay in the nature of one so weak and craven, he had loved Marcia Wellspring, and had fondly counted on spending many a long year in her arms, when once their desperate Fight for Five Millions was won.

Marcia turned to the officer in command and said earnestly:

"Kyte Darley is my husband, sir, and before you separate us, there are a few words I would like to speak to him, in at least partial privacy. Have I your permission?"

The man hesitated. He knew Kyte Darley by reputation as an exceedingly bold and slippery customer. He had seen and heard quite enough to convince him that in Marcia, the gambler had a true and fitting mate.

A faint smile of scorn curled the lips of the wife as she read this hesitation aright.

"You mistake, my dear sir. I do not ask for complete privacy. I will be content to speak under your eyes, but I simply ask that you order your men to step back a pace or two. If it will assist you in making up your mind, I swear that neither Kyte nor myself will try to run away!"

Stung more by her looks of contempt and derision than her words, the sign was made, and the officers fell back.

Marcia seemed to instantly lose sight and thought of them all, having eyes and care for none save her husband. Their lips met in a long, clinging pressure. Love shone unvailed from black and brown eyes. Not a word was uttered, that any of the watchers could hear, but then—

There was a smothered report, and Kyte Darley fell to the floor without a cry or moan, a bullet driven through his brain!

Even as they both fell, Marcia flung aside the derringer, with which she had placed her loved one beyond all human arrest, and drawing a long, slender dagger, pressed it home to her own heart, the weight of her body helping her hand as she pressed close to the bosom of her dead husband. And with her lips touching his, her spirit fled.

It was simple truth.

For nearly a week after Rufus Cramp and Kyte Darley left St. Louis on their dastardly mission, Romulus Wellspring kept hovering on the verge of death, but then he took a sudden change for the better, and not a little to their own surprise the consulting physicians declared that he would recover.

Silas Cramp was driven to desperation by this wholly unexpected peril. He had just received word that Rufus had started on the Superb with

Portia, and knew that even the telegraph could not catch him in time to prevent his playing another card in their dangerous game. And so, feeling that it was the only way out of the tangle, he attempted to poison the sick man, but so clumsily that he was caught in the act.

Broken down by those long weeks of plotting, confronted by his own deadly potion, the old man confessed all, even to the slightest detail of their cunning schemings.

Without the loss of a moment, warrants were sworn out for the arrest of Rufus Cramp and Kyte Darley. A swift steamer was bought outright by the millionaire, and he himself was carried on board her despite the arguments of his dismayed physicians.

He roundly cursed them for daring to cross his will, swearing that as soon as he could get beyond reach of their potions and quack nostrums, he would be himself again. And in this the end justified his redictions, though it was anxiety for his beloved child that helped him to fight back the demon of sickness. And it was this anxiety that kept the good steamer racing down the river at reckless speed day and night, never slackening until the pilots declared that they recognized the Superb grounded on a bar. And then—the old man gave way and was forced to see his officers leave the boat without him.

What followed, we have seen.

Marcia Darley had made sure work of it with both pistol and knife, and when the officers reached them, both were dead and beyond all mortal law.

They were borne ashore and buried in the wilderness, a wooden slab marking the spot, for future identification, should any such become necessary.

There was no longer thought of continuing the trip to St. Louis, for Romulus Wellspring declared that he had gained all he wished, and that he would hasten at once to Fairview to recruit with his child and Aunt Honor.

"Do what you please, just so you don't ask me to do what I most decidedly don't please!" he told the officers. "Take young Cramp back and stretch his neck in company with that of his father, if you like. I won't turn over my hand to save either of them. I won't turn it over to punish them. I'm done with the nasty affair, I tell you!"

And thus it had to be. A five-fold millionaire, Romulus Wellspring was hardly one whom they could grasp by the nape of the neck and force to prosecute. He had bought the boat. He was master of the situation, and plainly resolved to remain master.

Rufus Cramp was removed to the boat bound for up-river, but it was written that he should never come to trial for his part in the Fight for Five Millions. Erysipelas set in, and his lacerated cheek was finally the means of sending him to the grave.

Silas Cramp was kept in jail for some months, but Romulus Wellspring doggedly declined to prosecute, and in the end he was turned loose, to live a wretchedly miserable life for several years, dying finally, uncared for, going to the grave unwept, unhonored.

Chief Martin Tullar, his men and his prisoner, all took passage for New Orleans on the boat owned by the millionaire.

Portia was the means of this, and it was through her eloquent description of all she owed the Duke of Derringers that Romulus Wellspring interfered with such good success that, before the levee was reached, Martin Tullar had destroyed his papers and shaken hands with the gentleman sport, swearing that he'd rather lose his official head than to prosecute him, since it had all come about through his noble efforts to save such a lovely lady from her bitter enemies.

And—

But why dilate? Even a millionaire is but mortal, and Romulus Wellspring lived only for his daughter now. And Portia never sought to deny the words she uttered when Duke Barringer was put in irons through his manly defense of her life.

The millionaire only exacted one condition—that his future son-in-law should sign a pledge never again to play cards for money.

This was promptly done, and before the year was out, Portia Wellspring became Mrs. Marmaduke Barringer.

As next-of-kin, the little property left by Marcia Wellspring descended to Romulus Wellspring, and he caused her remains to be removed from the spot where first buried, with those of her husband, and had them reinterred beside those of her father, mother and the rest of the family. Every dollar was spent in erecting a stately monument over them, and then their very memory was banished from his life.

The millionaire lived to see his grandchildren growing up about him, and to know that the one-time "Duke of Derringers" was a thoroughly reformed gambler, a model husband, a loving father, a most agreeable son-in-law, and a model business man in whose hands he might safely leave the Wellspring Millions without fear.

THE END.

Edward L. Wheeler's

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